

# ST GREGORY PALAMAS AND ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

JOHN  
MEYENDORFF

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1998

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**ST GREGORY PALAMAS  
AND ORTHODOX  
SPIRITUALITY**

**JOHN MEYENDORFF**

*Translation by*  
**ADELE FISKE**

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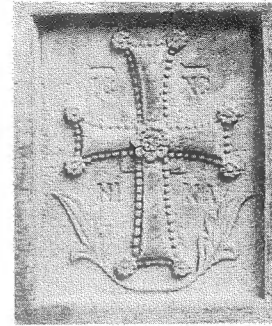
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*"O light of Orthodoxy, teacher of the Church, its confirmation! O ideal of monks and invincible champion of theologians! O wonder-working Gregory, glory of Thessalonika and preacher of grace! Always intercede before the Lord that our souls may be saved!"*

The Orthodox Church chants this hymn to St Gregory Palamas in the liturgy of the second Sunday of Lent, in veneration of the man who, several decades before the fall of Byzantium, integrated "hesychasm," Eastern Christianity's ancient tradition of contemplative monasticism, in a doctrinal synthesis.

Hesychasm is a monastic movement whose origins go back to the Fathers of the desert. It cannot, indeed, claim to be the only "orthodox" mysticism, which has always taken varied forms, as it still does today. But Palamas himself can be called a master of "orthodox mysticism" inasmuch as his work transcends the limits of one school of spirituality and renews in its deepest essence the life of the Christian Mystery.

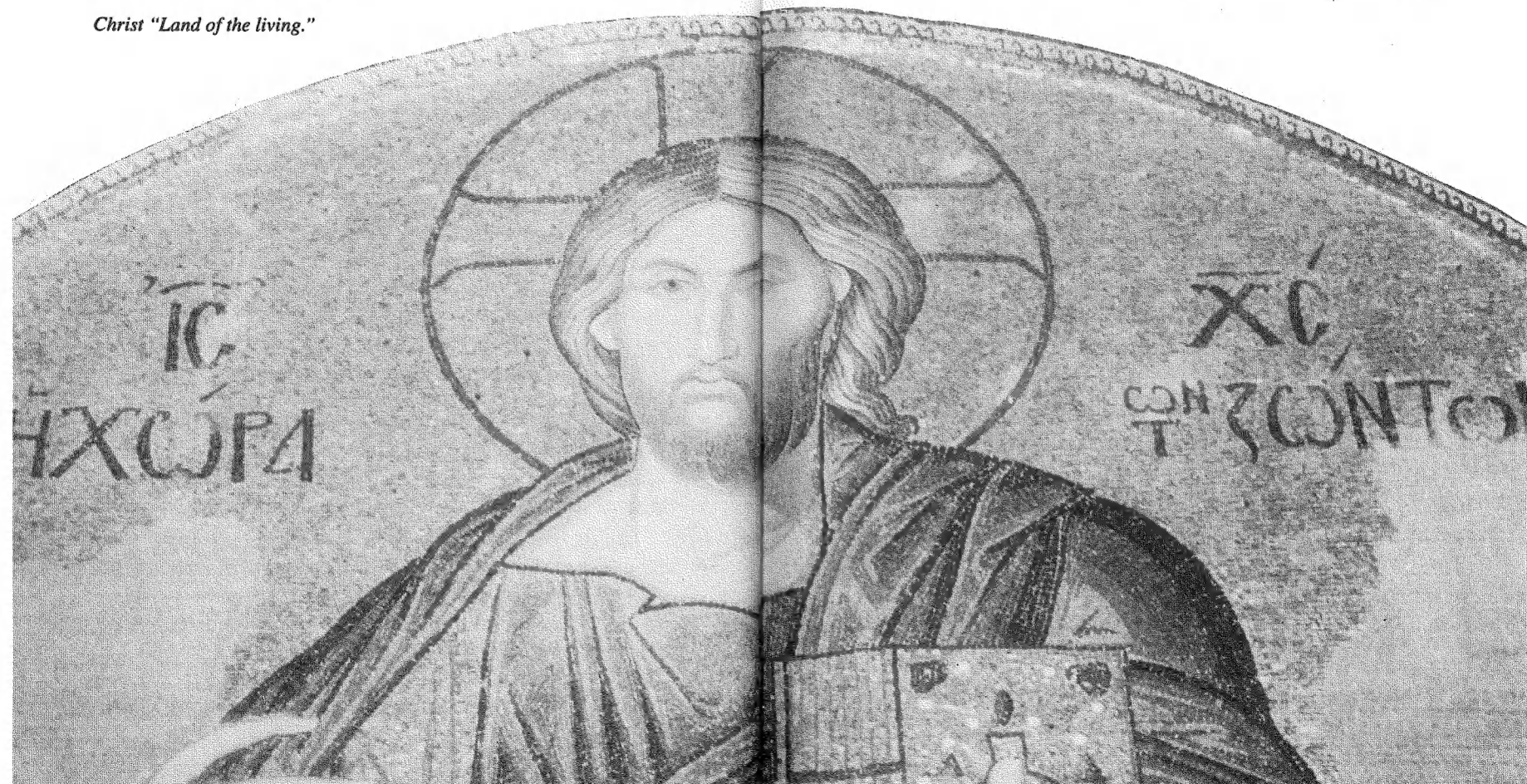
By the time of Palamas, Eastern monasticism already had a long history behind it. Its great masters had bequeathed it a vast body of writings. It had overcome trials and temptations. Its authority was immense among the contemporaries of Palamas. He himself accepted unreservedly the whole of this heritage, and his work was to emphasize its enduring doctrinal and spiritual elements at the very moment when the spirit of the

Renaissance first touched Byzantium and when the Christian West was passing through one of its most radical transformations. As so many values held to be absolute in the Middle Ages were being swept away, was the essence of Christianity also to disintegrate? Would the newly-attained autonomy of the intellect and of nature itself in this new society leave room for the spiritual life given by Christ, beyond the realm of all purely human achievement?

*Christ "Land of the living."*

The work of Palamas brought a solution to these problems. The Eastern Church has therefore regarded the victory of his teaching in fourteenth-century Byzantium not as the triumph of a particular form of mysticism but of orthodoxy itself. And this ecclesiastical approbation effectively disengaged from purely monastic tradition what was of lasting and universal validity.

*Mosaic, 14th c., Kariye Djami, Istanbul.*







*Monks in the desert. Miniature, 11th c.*

## The Spiritual Tradition of the Monks of the East

### PRIMITIVE MONASTICISM

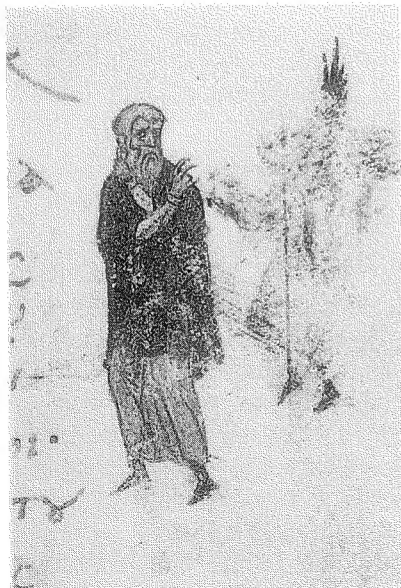
The primitive Christian community had no permanent monastic institutions. At first sight this fact seems surprising, for from recent studies we see more and more clearly the close ties that bound the Church of the first centuries to the Judaism of the time of Christ and especially to the prophetic tradition. Now, Judaism had long possessed its monks and anchorites. The prophets in their attacks on the conformism of established religion had developed a whole *desert* spirituality. To the people of the Middle East, deprivation of water is the most cruel curse; the desert is the land of desolation, the haunt of wild beasts alone; all nature there is hostile to man, subject to Satan, God's enemy. But there too the power of Jahweh is most manifest, for without it man has no hope for survival: there Jahweh is God the Savior.

"Where is Jahweh who leads us out of the land of Egypt and guides us in the desert, across an arid and eroded land, a land of dryness and darkness, a land where no man walks, where no man dwells?" (Jer 2:6).

To have led Israel out of the desert was God's great blessing; to entice it back again is Satan's desire.

Many times the (impure) Spirit takes possession of him; men bind him down, then, to keep him safe with chains and bonds, but he breaks the bonds and the demon drives him out into desert places" (Lk 8:24).

The ancient ritual of the "scapegoat" driven out to die in the desert provided an expiatory victim for the evil spirit Azazel (Lev 16:8 ff.). The Jews thus conceived of the desert as the dwelling

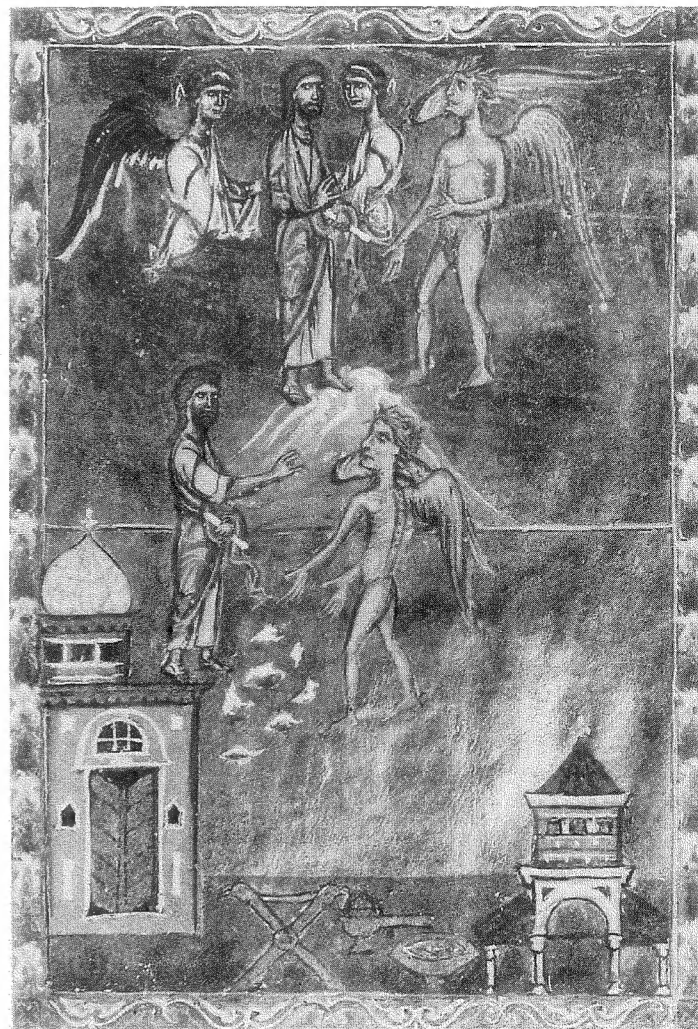


*Monk tempted by devil.  
Miniature, 11th c.*

place of the demon and the New Testament adopts this concept throughout: "When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it wanders in dry places seeking rest" (Matt 12:43).

Why did hermits thus flower in pre-Christian Judaism? Why did John the Baptist and Jesus Himself go out into the desert, far from the community of the chosen people, far from the temple, that sign of God's protection over Israel? Why did the Son of Man allow the demon to tempt him for forty days in the *desert*?

"God leads His people, and His Son and later the anchorites and hermits [into the desert]," a Protestant author writes, "not to cause them to flee from the world, but on the contrary to bring them to its heart so that there, in the hardest place of all, they may manifest His victory and His rights...When Jesus withdrew to the desert, generally after having worked a mira-



*The Temptation of Christ. Miniature, 12th c.*

cle, (Mk 1:35, Lk 4:42, 5:16) it is not only to seek privacy but to give all the glory to God" (J. J. Von Allmen, *Vocabulary of the Bible*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1958, p. 283).

The first creation began in a garden where "God made all kinds of trees grow from the earth, fair to look upon and good to eat" (Gen 1:9); but the redemption was first revealed in a desert.

"The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaias:

Behold! I send my messenger before you  
to prepare your way.  
A voice crying in the desert:  
Prepare the road of the Lord,  
make smooth his paths,

John the Baptist appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk 1:1-3). The desert is, then, the archetypal symbol of the world that is hostile to God, subject to Satan, the dead world to which the Messiah brought new life. And as His first coming was proclaimed by John the Baptist in the desert, so the Christian monks felt that their flight to the desert was an assault on the power of the Evil One, heralding the Second Coming.

We may wonder then, why the primitive Church, despite its continuity with Judaism, where the "monastic" idea was a living reality, waited so long to see followers of John the Precursor. The fact is that the Church as a whole was a pilgrim Church, a Church that had fled into the desert of this world. The seer of the Apocalypse expresses this in the symbol of the Woman: "The woman gave birth to a male child, he who is to lead all notions with a scepter of iron, and the child was taken away, up to God and his throne, while the woman fled into the desert where God had prepared a refuge for her for one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Rev 12:6).

So, too, the wanderings of the Hebrew people in the desert typify the Church, tempted by Satan, in the time between Pentecost



*St John the Baptist*



and the Second Coming of Christ. "For I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, all passed through the sea...yet most of them were not pleasing to God, for their bodies lie in the desert. These events happened as examples for us, that we might not follow evil desires as they did" (1 Cor 10:1-6).

But in the fourth century a new era began for Christianity. At that moment the Church, secure in newly-won imperial protection, luxuriating in wealth and privileges, was invaded by thousands of converts. Then the need arose to preserve in the Christian community that character that must remain until the Lord returns, of "the Woman fleeing into the desert." "In fact," Louis Bouyer writes, "the great innovation of the third and fourth centuries was not monasticism but rather the worldly life of the newly converted masses...Christians now

*The Hebrews in the desert*

*Mosaic, 13th c., San Marco, Venice.*



*Emperor Justinian and his court entering church.  
Mosaic, 6th c., San Vitale, Ravenna.*

become aediles, praetors, even—though it had very little significance any more—flamines of Jupiter...Bishops were no longer treated as criminals, but as important dignitaries by the highest authorities, even by pagans like Aurelian...Men who had lost an arm or leg or eye in the last persecutions now used what was left of them for the *plaustra* of the *divus Augustus*. And this movement swept through the entire church" (*La vie de Saint Antoine*, Éditions de Fontenelle, Abbaye de Saint-Wandrille, 1950, pp. 9-11). "Thus they seemed to have begun by forsaking the world as Christians, because it wanted no more of them. Now they seemed to get along so well together that the divorce is no longer desired, the world being so conciliating" (*Ibid.*, p. 7).

So monasticism renewed the prophetic ministry of ancient Israel in the Church. It bore witness against a bourgeois and

worldly Church that easily welcomed the Greco-Roman masses and accepted the bounties of "the most pious emperors" without remorse. Throughout the history of the Orthodox East, the Church was saved from absorption into the Empire by the hermits of the desert, the stylites standing year after year on their pillars, the great monastic communities that, like the monastery of Studios in Constantinople, preached the monastic ideal at the very heart of the city, commanding the reverence of the emperors and the Christian people. The essence of their testimony was that of the New Testament, not of the Old, in so far as the latter identified the chosen people with the nation and the state. Against the theocratic claims of the Christian Empire the monks affirmed that the Kingdom of God is a kingdom of the world to come; it is not a sociological or political phenomenon in human history; it is the very Presence of God.

And the monks were the authoritative spokesmen for the Eastern Church. The Church adopted their liturgy, their spiritual way, their type of holiness. In the sixth century it even decreed that the episcopate be recruited exclusively from among the monks. In fact, throughout the Middle Ages, the monks formed the elite of Christian society in the East.

And yet the monastic way of life faced temptations and dangers. The hermit who fled to the desert and who lived for years without the sacraments, the monastery as a community isolated from the rest of the Church—did they not in fact separate themselves from the whole Christian body? Were they not dividing the people of God? Were they not substituting an individualistic piety for that communal spirituality that is the very essence of Christianity? Were not the ascetic feats of the desert Fathers mere human techniques for acquiring grace, that made grace itself no longer a free gift of God? It is clear that all these deviations have appeared in the history of monasticism, but it is no less clear that after some hesitations the Church created institutions and defined doctrines which were able to cope with the

temptations. Institutionally, the monks were put under the authority of the local bishops and were thus integrated into that nucleus of Christian life, the local church; it is characteristic that the East has always opposed attempts to create religious orders "exempt" from the power of the ordinaries...On the level of doctrine, after a prolonged process of analysis and distinction, the Church came to condemn religious individualism and over-emphasis on the spiritual which certain monastic tendencies introduced into Christian mysticism. The next few pages will discuss these doctrinal tendencies.

## EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS (†399) AND PURE PRAYER

Born in Pontus in Asia Minor, friend and disciple of the great Cappadocian Fathers, Basil and the two Gregorys, Evagrius was the first intellectual to adopt the life of the anchorites in the Egyptian desert. Not content with imitating their ascetic practices and manner of prayer, he tried to integrate them into a metaphysical and anthropological system inspired by Neoplatonism. With Evagrius, the desert anchorites began to speak the language of the Christian *didaskaleion* of Alexandria. This is particularly marked in Evagrius' teaching on prayer.

In their deliberate withdrawal from the communal life of the Church and their total consecration to the struggle against demonic powers, manifested through bodily needs and fleshly passions, the monks saw the New Testament precepts on prayer as their surest way to receive the grace of redemption.

"This kind can be driven out only by prayer" (Mk 9:29).

"Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17).

Alone with God, the monks inevitably turned to individual prayer as the essential and positive element in Christian spirituality, the ultimate crown of all ascetic practices. They had renounced all the activities that form the concrete "building up of the Body of Christ" in the world—missionary work, teaching, works of charity—often they even abandoned the regular participation in the sacraments. Hence the one thing that did remain for them, the sole aim of their life, was prayer; by prayer they could realize the fruits of baptism and in prayer come to know God.

Evagrius was the first great codifier of the monastic doctrine of prayer. Here are some of his *Chapters*, which came to us under the name of St. Nilus of Sinai (the true Evagrian authorship having been established by I. Hausherr):

3. *Prayer is a continual intercourse of the mind with God.*

5. *Pray first for the gift of tears so that by means of sorrow you may soften your native rudeness. Then having confessed your sins to the Lord you will obtain pardon for them.*

9. *Stand resolute, fully intent on your prayer. Pay no heed to the concerns and thoughts that might arise the while. They do nothing better than disturb and upset you so as to dissolve the fixity of your purpose.*

10. *When the devils see that you are really fervent in our prayer they suggest certain matters to your mind, giving you the impression that there are pressing concerns demanding attention. In a little while they stir up your memory of these matters and move your mind to search into them.*

11. *Strive to render your mind deaf and dumb at the time of prayer and then you will be able to pray.*

15. *Prayer is the fruit of joy and of thanksgiving...*

16. *Prayer is the exclusion of sadness and despondency.*

28. *Do not pray by outward gestures only, but bend your mind as well to the perception of spiritual prayer with great fear.*

31. *Pray not to this end, that your own desires be fulfilled. You can be sure they do not fully accord with the will of God.*

34. *Undistracted prayer is the highest act of the mind.*

35. *Prayer is an ascent of the mind to God...*

37. *First of all pray to be purified from your passions. Secondly, pray to be delivered from ignorance. Thirdly, pray to be freed from all temptation and abandonment.*

38. *In your prayer seek only after justice and the kingdom of God, that is to say, after virtue and true spiritual knowledge. Then all else will be given to you besides.*

43. *If your mind still looks around at the time of prayer, then it does not yet pray as a monk. You are no better than a man of affairs engaged in a kind of landscape gardening.*



52. *The state of prayer can be aptly described as a habitual state of imperturbable calm. It snatches to the heights of intelligible reality the mind which loves wisdom and which is truly spiritualized by the most intense love.*

66. *When you are praying do not fancy the Divinity like some image formed within yourself. Avoid also allowing your mind to be impressed with the seal of some particular shape, but rather, free from all matter, draw near to the immaterial Being and you will attain to understanding.*

70. *You will not be able to pray purely if you are all involved with material affairs and agitated with unremitting concerns. For prayer is the rejection of concepts.*

83. *The singing of Psalms quiets the passions and calms the intemperance of the body. Prayer, on the other hand, prepares the mind to put its own powers into operation.*

84. *Prayer is activity which is appropriate to the dignity of the mind; or better, it is appropriate for its nobler and adequate operation.*

110. *Keep your eyes lowered while you are praying. Deny your flesh and your desires and live according to the mind.*

113. *By true prayer a monk becomes another angel, for he ardently longs to see the face of the Father in heaven.*

119. *Happy is the mind that becomes free of all matter and is stripped of all at the time of prayer.*

124. *A monk is a man who is separated from all and who is in harmony with all.*

125. *A monk is a man who considers himself one with all men because he seems constantly to see himself in every man.*

150. *Just as sight is the most worthy of the senses, so also is prayer the most divine of the virtues.*

153. *When you give yourself to prayer, rise above every other joy—then you will find true prayer.*

(Tr. J. E. Bamberger, in *Evagrius Ponticus, The Praktikos*,

*Chapters on Prayer*, Cistercian Publications, Spencer, Massachusetts, 1970, pp. 56-80.)

These few *Chapters*, which were to provide a mystical spirituality and vocabulary for following generations, reflect the essence of the monastic vocation as expressed by St. Macarius: "The monk (from the Greek *monos*, alone) is called ■ monk because of this: night and day he converses with God and thinks of nothing but the things of God, possessing nothing on earth" (quoted by I. Hausherr, *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* XV, 1934, p. 76). But unfortunately their influence was not only positive: through them—and through the entire work of Evagrius—the monks of the Christian East learned to use Neoplatonic language, which was that of contemporary philosophy, but which was hardly compatible with Christianity itself, even if it appeared as a justification of desert spirituality. Evagrius himself was posthumously condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553). His writings continued to be recopied and disseminated only because they were attributed pseudonymously to St. Nilus. Was he not as Origen's disciple transforming prophetic monasticism into an intellectualized spirituality? The Neoplatonic concept of the natural divinity of the human mind (*nous*) led him to see monastic asceticism not as a witness proclaimed *by matter itself* to the presence of the Kingdom of God within us, but as a disembodiment of the mind in prayer to give itself over to its "proper activity." Evagrius could write his treatise *On Prayer* with ■ few allusions to Scripture but without even one reference to Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God! The tradition of Orthodox monasticism therefore had important changes to effect in Evagrius' doctrine. It was to adopt his notion of perpetual "prayer of the mind," but transformed it into the "prayer of Jesus." For, in the end, is not the person of Christ the only criterion and only norm of Christian spirituality?

## MACARIUS AND MYSTICISM OF THE HEART

St. Macarius of Egypt was Evagrius' master in the Egyptian desert of Scete. In the few of his apophthegms still extant he appears as one of the first teachers of "pure" prayer, that is, the constant repetition of a short formula whose essential element is the Name of God, "Lord."

*They asked Abbot Macarius: how should one pray? The old man (geron; in Russian: starets) answered: There is no need to waste time with words; it is enough to hold out your hands and say: Lord, according to your desire and to your wisdom, have mercy. If you are hard pressed in the struggle, say: Lord, save me! He knows what is best for you, and he will have mercy on you* (French translation by Gouillard, *Petite Philocalie*, Éditions des Cahiers du Sud, Paris, 1953, p. 58).

In its primitive form the "Jesus prayer" seems in fact to be the *Kyrie eleison* ("Lord have mercy") whose constant repetition in the Eastern liturgies goes back to the Fathers of the desert.

The name of Saint Macarius is also linked to an important work, the *Spiritual Homilies*, which do not belong to Macarius himself but to an anonymous author of the late fourth century. The work of this great spiritual writer, to whom we will refer here as "Macarius," will be studied in this chapter. First note that his chief divergence from Evagrius is his anthropology. Evagrius was essentially a Platonist who thought of man as an intellect imprisoned in matter: the body thus could have no place in the spiritual life, nor could even the Word *Incarnate*. But Macarius' teaching on ceaseless prayer is directly inspired by the Bible and also echoes the Stoics: man is a single whole, and as such he comes in contact with God.

In the last thirty years, some scholars have held that Macarius belonged to the Messalian sect, arguing from the internal evidence of certain Macarian passages, dualistic in thought,



*St Macarius of Egypt. Fresco by Theophanes the Greek,  
14 th c., Novgorod.*

and also from the "materialistic" anthropology of the author of the *Homilies*. Fortunately today there are more and more adversaries of this thesis. Werner Jaeger writes: "...it seems much more likely that Macarius interpreted those of his beliefs that scholars have compared with what little we know of the Messalian sect in a more spiritual sense, and did not take them from this heretic group but from some common monastic tradition" (*Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius*, E. S. Brill, Leyden, 1954, p. 225). Messalianism and Neoplatonism in fact are the two extreme and mutually contradictory temptations of the spiritual tradition of the Christian East, but Macarius certainly sacrificed less to the first than Evagrius did to the second.

Macarian mysticism is entirely based on the Incarnation of the Word. For him monastic life is not the restoration of the "activity proper to the intellect," but a deeper fulfillment within us of the grace of baptism; the unceasing prayer of the monk is not aimed at freeing the spirit from the impediment of the flesh; it allows man even here below to enter into eschatological reality, the Kingdom of God, which embraces him, his spirit and his body, in a divine communion. The whole man, body and soul, was created in the image of God and the whole man is called to divine glory. The Platonic intellectualism of Evagrius withdraws man from visible history and inserts him in a spatial "beyond" that is entirely alien to matter; in the mysticism of Macarius on the contrary, the Kingdom permeates the visible world in order to liberate it from Satan's dominion, to illuminate it even now with a foretaste of the glory of the world to come. For Macarius, therefore, the Christ who has come, who is still to come, and who is now sacramentally present in the Church, is the unique center of the monk's spiritual life.

*The unutterable and incomprehensible God has in his goodness humbled himself; he has clothed himself with the members of this body that we see, and has abandoned his own*

*unapproachable glory; in his clemency and his love for men he transforms himself, incarnates himself, mingles himself with the holy, pious and faithful ones, becomes "one spirit" with them according to Paul (1 Cor 6:17)—soul: into soul and person into person, so to speak—so that the living being may be able to live in everlasting youthfulness, experience immortal life, and participate in incorruptible glory (Hom. IV, 10; PG 34, 480 BC).*

The constant Christocentric emphasis of the author of the *Spiritual Homilies* leads him far beyond Messalian dualism in which God and Satan co-exist in man's soul as two equal powers:

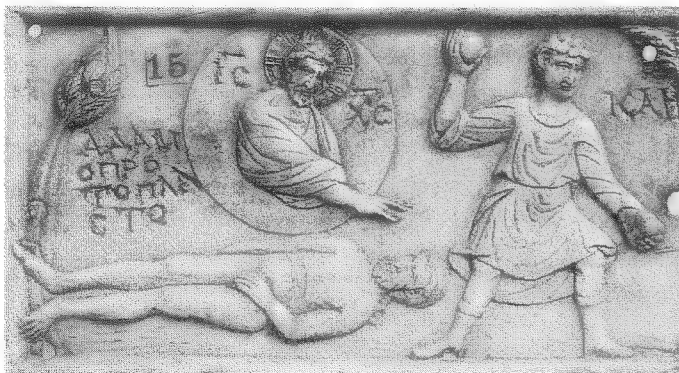
*Because man infringed the commandment, the demon has covered the soul entirely with a heavy veil. But behold, grace comes and lifts the entire veil: from now on the purified soul... with purified eyes contemplates the glory of the true light and the true Sun of justice shining in its heart (Hom. XVII, 3; ibid. 625 B).*

The heretical Messalians, those Eastern Pelagians, knew only one way to struggle against Satan: a purely human effort which draws down grace, but is in its origin independent of divine intervention. For Macarius, man's only deliverance comes by baptism. Prayer and the whole spiritual life are only means of stimulating the growth of the seed sown in the "bath of regeneration."

*By the analogy of faith, the Divine Spirit, our Advocate, who was sent to the apostles and through them drawn down upon the only true Church of God at the moment of baptism, this Spirit in various manifold ways accompanies every man who comes to baptism in faith (The Great Letter, ed. Jaeger, p. 236).*

*Christians belong to another world, they are the sons of the Heavenly Adam, a new people, children of the Holy Spirit, radiant brothers of Christ, like unto their Father: the spiritual and radiant Adam... (Hom. XVI, 8; PG 34, 617-620).*

*In the same manner as a man of great wealth who has servants and sons, gives one kind of food to his servants and another*



*The creation of man. Ivory, 11th c.*

to the children who are born of him—for children are in reality their father's heirs; they eat with him and are his equals—so too does Christ, the true Master, who has created all things and feeds the wicked and the ungrateful. But the children whom he himself begot, to whom he has given his grace, whose form the Lord himself has taken, these he brings up in special security with special food, special meat and drink; he gives himself to them because they live with their Father; in fact the Lord said: *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him* (John 6:56), and he shall never see death (Hom. XIV, 4, or XIII in Dörries' edition; *ibid.* 572 CD).

*The glory that the saints possess in their souls even today will (on the Day of Resurrection) clothe their naked bodies again and raise them up to the heavens. Then our body and our soul will rest eternally with the Lord in the Kingdom. When God created Adam he did not give him bodily wings like the birds but prepared for him in advance the wings of the Holy Spirit—the wings he desires to give him in the resurrection—to lift him up and carry him wherever the Spirit wishes. Saintly souls receive these wings even now when they take flight in the spirit toward heavenly thoughts.*

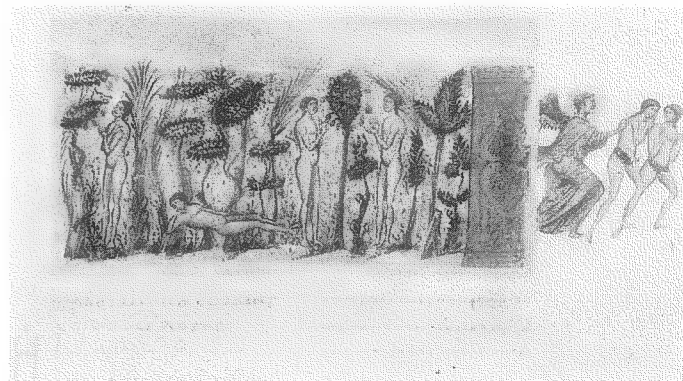
*In fact, Christians live in a different world: they have a table that belongs to them alone, a delight, a communion, a way of thinking uniquely theirs. That is why they are the strongest of men. They receive this strength in the interior of their souls from the Holy Spirit. That is why in the resurrection their bodies too will receive the eternal good things of the Spirit and be united to the glory that even now their souls experience and possess* (Hom. V, 11; *ibid.* 516).

This last passage shows clearly how, for Macarius, the end of the Christian life and in particular of the monks' unceasing prayer is to manifest the ferment of grace that is even now at work within Christians, preparing in them the coming of the Kingdom. The pre-eminent abode of this grace is the "heart."

*Thus it is possible to taste in Christianity the grace of God: Taste and see that the Lord is sweet* (Ps 34:9). *This tasting is the dynamic power of the Spirit manifesting itself in full certitude in the heart. The sons of light, ministers of the New Covenant in the Holy Spirit, have nothing to learn from men; they are taught by God. Grace itself engraves the laws of the Spirit on their hearts...In fact the heart is master and king of the whole bodily organism, and when grace takes possession of the pasture-land of the heart, it rules over all its members and all its thoughts; for it is in the heart that the intelligence dwells, and there dwell all the soul's thoughts; it finds all its good in the heart. That is why grace penetrates all the members of the body* (Hom. XV, 20; *ibid.* 589 AB).

This concept of the heart as center of the organism and seat of intelligence was to have, as we shall see, a special development in Eastern Christian mysticism. Let us be content here with noting that Macarius' thought moves in a world entirely alien to that of Evagrius: he incorporates desert spirituality and unceasing prayer into a concept of man in which the whole being, reborn in the sacraments, enters into grace. No doubt certain expressions might well be worded more precisely, but the

fundamental inspiration is clearly distinct from the gross materialism for which the Messalians are reproached—a “vision of the divine essence with the bodily eyes”—and has the immense value of counterbalancing the predominance of Evagrian intellectualism in the monastic tradition.



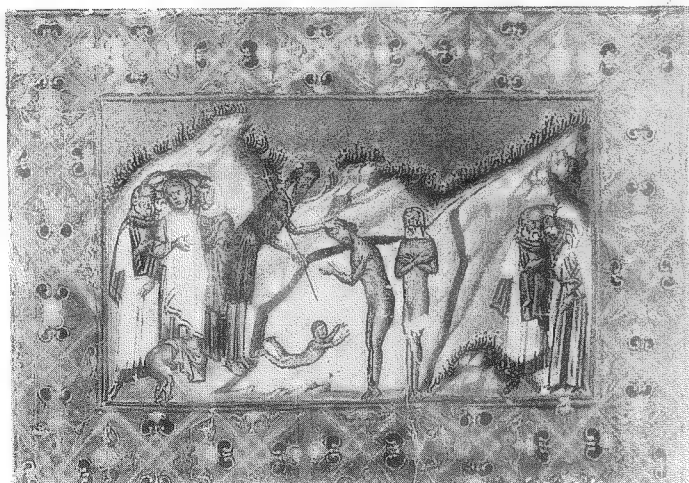
*The sin of Adam. Miniature, 11th c.*

## THE PRAYER OF JESUS

Evagrius and Macarius defined all the essential elements found in the later spiritual tradition of Eastern monasticism. The value of authors such as Diadochus of Photice or John Climacus who were quite popular in later centuries consisted chiefly in the synthesis they effected between Evagrius and Macarius. Thus the “intellectual prayer” of Evagrius became in the East the “prayer of the heart,” a personal prayer explicitly addressed to the Incarnate Word, the “Jesus prayer” in which the “recollection of the Name” holds essential place.

Diadochus, a fifth-century bishop of Photice in Epirus, was one of the great popularizers of desert spirituality in the Byzantine world. His emphasis on the sacramental life and the personal character of Christian prayer shows traces of Evagrian spiritualization, but in his *Chapters* we see all the concern of orthodox spiritual masters to integrate “hesychasm” with Biblical perspectives of history whose essential elements are the fall, redemption and future glory.





*Baptism. Miniature, 12th c.*

*We are the image of God through the intelligent movement of the soul that dwells in the body. But when in consequence of Adam's sin, not only were the traits of this image-likeness defiled, but even our body fell little by little into corruption, then the holy Word of God became incarnate and, being God, communicated to us the water of salvation by the rebirth of baptism. We then are regenerated through water by the action of the holy and life-giving Spirit, so that we are made pure both in soul and body—those at least who go to God with their whole will—for the Holy Spirit makes his abode in us and drives out sin... (Chapters on Spiritual Perfection, 78, ed. E. des Places, Sources chrétiennes, 5, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1943, p. 136).*

*Grace hides its presence within the baptized, waiting for the soul's desire; when the whole man turns himself wholly to the Lord, then in an unutterable experience it reveals its presence in the heart.... If man begins to advance by observing the*

*commandments and unwearyingly invoking the Lord Jesus, then the fire of divine grace diffuses itself even to the exterior senses of the heart... (chap. 85, ibid. pp. 146-147).*

*When we close every outlet to the mind by the recollection of God, it imperiously demands something to satisfy its need of activity. We must then give it the Lord Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 21:13), as the sole occupation that fully answers its need... (chap. 59, ibid. pp. 115-116).*

*When the soul is agitated by anger, or troubled by dissipation or oppressed by heavy discouragement, no matter what violence it does itself, the mind cannot achieve recollection of the Lord Jesus... But when the soul frees itself from passions, then it possesses the very grace that meditates with it and cries to the Lord Jesus, just as a mother teaches her little child the word "father," repeating it with him until, instead of the usual*

*The Transfiguration.*

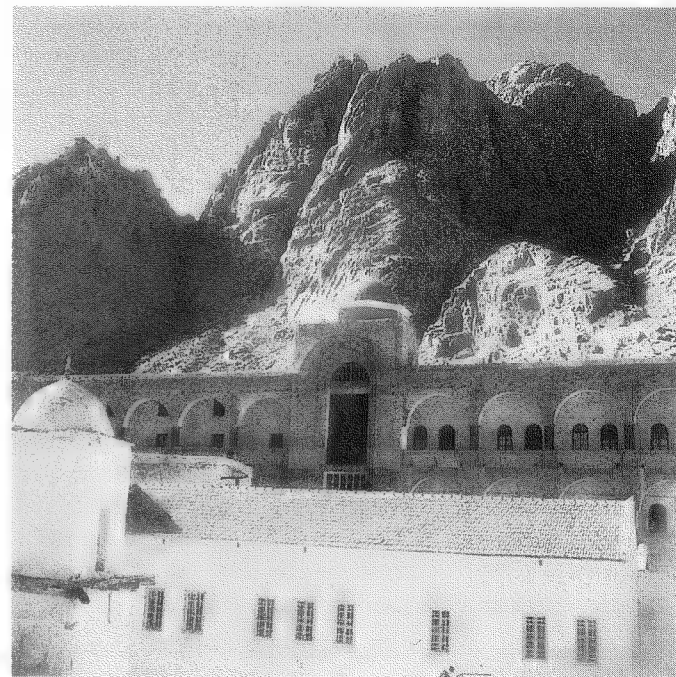
*Mosaic, 6th c., Mount Sinai.*



*Mount Sinai. 11th c.*

*baby's babble, he learns to call his father distinctly by name, even in his sleep. That is why the Apostle says: "The Spirit likewise comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us by unutterable groanings" (Rom 8:26) (chap. 61, ibid. pp. 117-118).*

The most important center for the diffusion of hesychasm after the sixth century was the famous monastery founded by Justinian on Mount Sinai. The light mysticism, linked by Origen and Saint Gregory of Nyssa to the Biblical image of Moses, thus had its school on the very spot where God had

*Mount Sinai. 20th c.*

given the Law to His people. It is remarkable that the apse of the main church of the monastery of Saint Catherine is decorated by a sixth-century mosaic representing the Transfiguration. In the thought of the founders of the monastery the Sinaitic vision of Moses is linked to the theophany of Mount Tabor, during which Moses appeared in the divine light of the Incarnate Word. The object sought—within themselves—by the hesychasts of the Christian East up to the sixteenth century, was to be the “light of the world to come,” seen first in anticipation on Sinai and fully manifested on Tabor.

The most remarkable among the great Sinaitic doctors is undeniably John, around 580-650, the abbot of the convent of Saint Catherine, who was given the name “Climacus” because of the work that made him famous: *The Ladder* (Greek: *Klimax*) of *Paradise*. The focal point of the detailed system of the *Ladder's* monastic spirituality, like that of Diadochus, is the invocation of the Name of Jesus. The vocabulary is still often Evagriian, but the immediate context, acknowledging the role of the human body in prayer itself, is proof of John's Biblical and Christian inspiration. Certain phrases might even lead us to believe that the Sinaitic abbot already knew the practice of uniting the Jesus prayer to breathing, later adopted by the fourteenth-century hesychasts. Hence it is not surprising to find many references to the *Ladder* in later authors—Nicephorus the Hesychast, Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas. The exceptional authority of Climacus even led the Byzantine Church to celebrate his memory on the fifth Sunday of Lent, thus ranking him first among the spiritual and ascetic doctors. In the West the text of the *Ladder* was known from the Middle Ages on; a French translation by Arnauld d'Andilly, published in Paris in 1652, greatly increased its popularity; an English translation by Lazarus Moore is also available (London, Faber and Faber, 1959).

*Let there be no studied elegance in the words of your prayer: how often the simple and monotonous lisps of little children*

*make their father give in to them! Do not launch out into long discourses that fritter away your mind in efforts for eloquence. One word alone spoken by the Publican touched God's mercy; a single word full of faith saved the Good Thief. Prolixity in prayer often fills the mind with images and distracts it, while often one single word draws it into recollection...(Step 28).*

*The hesychast is one who aspires to circumscribe the Incorporeal in a dwelling of flesh...The case of the cenobite is not the same as that of the monk (solitary). The monk needs great vigilance and a mind free of agitation: the cenobite often is helped by a brother; the monk by an angel...(Step 27).*

This passage, very dear to the fourteenth-century hesychast, states clearly the essence of hesychasm, here identified—and rightly—with “monasticism.” The etymological derivation of this last term (*monos*, alone) shows its primitive meaning. The “monk” is the man who lives alone with God, and in this he is unlike the cenobite. He has no other recourse than to seek God within himself and there he finds Him, for the grace of baptism is present in the “heart.”

*The hesychast is one who says: “My heart is strengthened” (Ps 57:8). The hesychast is one who says: “I sleep, but my heart watches” (Cant 5:2). Close your cell door to your body, the door of your lips to words, the interior door to spirits.*

*A poor man who is obedient is better than a distracted hesychast... Solitude (hesychia) is worship and uninterrupted service of God. May the name of Jesus be united with your breath; then you will understand the value of solitude (Step 27).*

The Jesus prayer thus is found at the center of all hesychast spirituality. The Name The Incarnate Word is bound up in the essential functions of being: it is present in the “heart,” it is linked to the breath. We must point out, however, that the great Eastern doctors of “unceasing prayer” are unanimous in warning against any confusion of this “memory of Jesus” and the





*St John Climacus. Icon, 15th c., Mount Sinai.*

effects that simple imagination might produce in the soul of the Christian. This "recollection" never becomes a "meditation" on one or another episode in the life of Christ; the novice is never asked to imagine an image exterior to himself. Instead the monk is called to become conscious of the actual presence of Jesus in the interior of his own being, a presence given full and existential reality by the life of the sacraments, without any images. The luminous vision that may then be experienced will not be a mere symbol or an effect of imagination, but a theophany as true as that on Mount Tabor since it is a manifestation of the same deified Body of Christ.

That is why the spiritual life of the monks of the desert is so closely bound up with the theology of deification that we find in the Greek Fathers.



*Monks praying.  
Miniature, 11th c.*

## DOCTRINE OF DEIFICATION: GREGORY OF NYSSA AND MAXIMUS

Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor both belong to the great line of Christian mystics who have succeeded in expressing the fundamental realities of Christian spirituality in the framework of Neoplatonic philosophy. We cite here these two great names not because they alone in the Christian East spoke of deification, but because their personalities, at the crossroad of spirituality and pure speculation, have exercised a decisive influence on later Byzantine thought. In theology both attacked the problem that a Diadochus or a John Climacus met on the spiritual plane: how to express in the language of Neoplatonism, universally accepted in their time, the Christian mystery of the Incarnation and of salvation in Jesus Christ.

"The glory that thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfectly one" (Jn 17: 22-23). To express this New Testament doctrine of union with God—union that alone can deliver men from death and sin, union that is the very essence of Christ's work the Greek Fathers use the concept of "deification" (*theosis*). Like all spiritual writers, Gregory of Nyssa is interested in the process of that union. The grace of deification, granted potentially in baptism, accepted freely and progressively throughout the whole course of life, leads us to vision and union. Philo had already seen Moses as the type of the mystic; Origen and, following him, Gregory of Nyssa also adopted the convenient—because Biblical—way of describing the Christian's spiritual ascent in terms of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai. In it they found the essential elements of the Christian doctrine of knowledge of God. The mystery of the darkness where God is found and where Moses was admitted to see Him thus becomes an image of the Unknowable One who reveals Himself to man.

*What is the significance of the entrance of Moses into the cloud and his vision of God?... As the mind, moving forward by*

*Christ Transfigured. Mosaic, 6th c., Mount Sinai.*





St. Gregory of Nyssa. Mosaic, 11th c., St Sophia, Kiev.



The Vision of Moses. Miniature, 12th c.

ever more perfect concentration, comes to understand true knowledge of realities, as it draws closer to contemplation, the more it sees that the divine nature is invisible. Leaving behind all appearances, not only of the senses but of what the intellect sees in thought, it turns always more to the interior world, until by the effort of mind it penetrates even to the Invisible and the Unknowable and there it sees God. For in fact true knowledge and true vision of the One it seeks consists in seeing that He is invisible, wrapped all around by His Unknowability as by a cloud. That is why the great John, who penetrated into that luminous cloud, says that "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18), asserting by this negation that the knowledge of

*the divine essence is inaccessible not only to men but to all intellectual beings. Thus when Moses makes progress in knowledge, he declares that he sees God in the darkness, that is to say, he understands that the divinity is that which transcends all knowledge and escapes the grasp of the mind. "Moses entered into the darkness where God was," the Scripture says. What God? "He who makes darkness his retreat," as David says (Ps. 17:12) (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 163-164; PG 44, 376 C-377 B).*

Gregory of Nyssa thus states in its full sweep the doctrinal problem of the knowledge of God: there is here a paradox, an antinomy that is expressed in the image of the "luminous darkness." The Unknowable makes itself known while remaining unknowable and its unknowability is deepest for the one who sees It. In expressing this primordial fact of Christian religious experience, Gregory uses Neoplatonic terms, but the reality that these terms convey is that of the Holy One of Israel: when in his spiritual ascent man suddenly finds himself face to face with Him, he is crushed by the experience of a Divine Transcendence. Yet God is a living God and communicates Himself to man. To express this communication Gregory has already distinguished between the divine essence and its "energies," that is, the real manifestations that make the divine life accessible without destroying the inaccessibility of God.

*The majority of men believe that the term "Divinity" is properly to be applied to the divine nature...But we are following the indications of Scripture and we know that that nature is beyond all name and all speech; we say that every (divine) name whether invented by man or transmitted by Scripture, explains only concepts that are relative to that nature while the meaning of the nature itself is beyond comprehension...Hence since we conceive the diverse energies of the transcendent Power, we derive names from each of the energies known to us... (To Ablabius, PG 45, 120 D-121 D).*

This affirmation of the essential transcendence of God is the corrective brought by the theologians to the spiritual teaching of the desert Fathers. Yes, "pure prayer" gives a knowledge of God. Yes, Jesus is intimately present in the Christian's heart. But this presence can never be more than a free act (*energeia*) of God, who in His essence remains inaccessible, a grace of the essentially transcendent God.

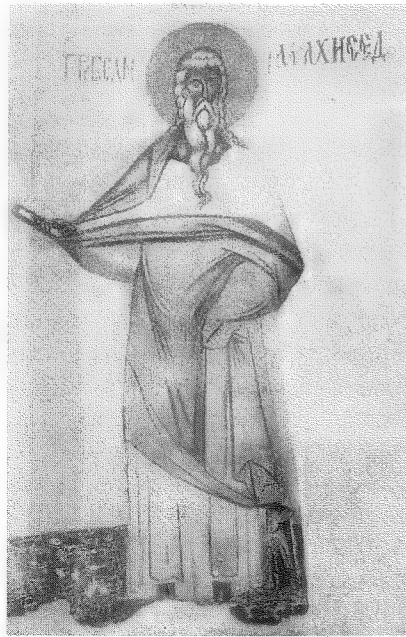
We find the principal elements of the mysticism of Gregory of Nyssa again in Maximus the Confessor. A few quotations will bring out his realistic doctrine of deification and his Christology.

Maximus insists even more than Gregory of Nyssa on the fact that the vision of God in darkness is a participation (*metochê*) in God, a deification (*theosis*). The influence of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, however, accentuates also the doctrine of the inaccessibility of God—"apophatic" or negative theology, which separates the divine from all objects of natural knowledge. Hence Maximus' thought sharpens the antinomy and paradox of communion with God. Deification is an entirely supernatural fact for Maximus, an act of the all-powerful God that springs *freely* from His transcendence while remaining *essentially* unknowable.

*The saints become that which can never belong to the power of nature alone, since nature possesses no faculty capable of perceiving what surpasses it. In fact, there is no aspect of deification that is the work of nature, since nature cannot comprehend God. Divine grace alone possesses of itself the faculty of communicating deification to beings in a manner analogous to them; then nature shines forth with ■ supernatural light and is transported above its own limits by a superabundance of glory (To Thalassius, 22; PG 90, 321 A).*

Participation in God is ■ total participation in Jesus Christ. In fact there could be no participation in a "part" of God, for the divine Being is simple and therefore indivisible, and the divine "energy" is God, not lessened, but freely revealed.





*Melchisedek.*

*Fresco by Theophanes the Greek, 14th c., Novgorod.*

To describe the deified state of man, Maximus turns to Pauline texts and also to the mysterious figure of Melchisedek:

*The admirable Paul denied his own existence and did not know whether he possessed a life of his own: "I live no more, for Christ lives in me..." (Gal 2:20).... (Man), the image of God, becomes God by deification; he rejoices to the full in abandoning all that is his by nature...because the grace of the Spirit triumphs in him and because manifestly God alone is acting in him; thus God and those worthy of God possess in all things one and the same energy, or rather, this common energy is the energy of God alone, since he communicates himself wholly to those who are wholly worthy (Ambigua; PG 91, 1076 BC).*

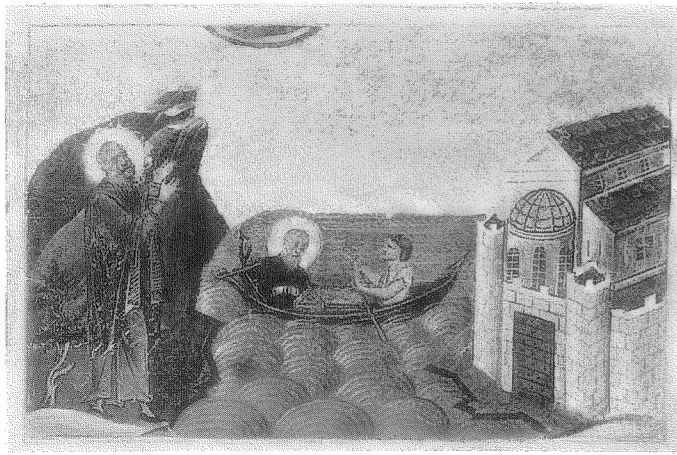
*Melchisedek possessed in himself the unique Word of God, living and acting...He became without beginning and without end, since he lived no longer by that temporal and ever changing life that has a beginning and an end and is shaken by many passions, but only by the divine life of the Word which dwelled within him, the eternal life, that is not limited by death (ibid. 1144 C).*

This teaching of Maximus on deification is bound up with the orthodox Christology that he defended and that finally triumphed in 681 at the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople. The two natures of Christ are not, as the Monothelites held in their partisan effort at compromise with Monophysitism, abstract ideas, to all practical purposes fused in the divinity of the Word. According to Maximus each nature has its own real manifestation, possesses its own existence proper to itself, its own, "will," even though the two are united in the person of the Word and the human will is subject in all things to the divine will. To Maximus the idea of "will" did not possess the meaning it has in modern individualistic philosophy: it was a synonym for "energy" and meant the manifestation of *real existence*. This vocabulary gives his thought an existential character: the Monothelite assertion that Christ has a human nature but not a human will lacks any real meaning since according to them this nature has no existential manifestation. It is in fact nothing more than an abstract idea. For Maximus on the contrary the "energy" or human will exists in its fullness in Jesus, and salvation consists precisely in its being conformed totally and freely to the divine energy or will: all Christians, uniting themselves sacramentally and mystically to Christ, attaching themselves to His human will, attach themselves also to the divine will. Thus when Maximus says in the text quoted above that "those worthy of God possess in all things one and the same energy" with God, he is not denying the reality of their human nature but affirming that now being deified, they conform their own proper energy to God's energy, which they then receive in themselves.

Before leaving the great patristic period with Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus, we must note that these doctors both belong to the "hesychast" tradition taken in its widest sense. As W. Jaeger has shown so clearly, Gregory's spiritual and mystical teaching complements the exterior rules of discipline that his brother Basil had established for the monks of Asia Minor. His Moses is primarily the contemplative monk who "exiles himself from the society of men for forty years, and, living alone with himself alone, fixes his regard, untroubled and in tranquility ("by *hesychia*") on the contemplation of things invisible" (*Commentary on the Psalms*, PG 44, 456 C). And Maximus, so profoundly influenced by Evagrius, has left us not only difficult theological treatises but also spiritual writings which reveal him as teacher of the unceasing prayer which, already by the seventh century, was well known in the East. Later Byzantine spirituality thus inherited from the Fathers theology and prayer not as two separate domains but as one, in a contemplation open to every Christian whatever his cultural or intellectual level.



*The Martyrdom of St Maximus, 14th c.*



*Monastery of Studios. Miniature, 10th c.*

### **SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN (949-1022)**

Symeon was a Studite monk, later abbot of the monastery of Saint Mamas in Constantinople, who holds a unique place in the history of Eastern Christian spirituality. For while on the one hand he belongs to the great line of mystics of the Jesus prayer, whose tradition he fully accepted, on the other, his strong and unusual personality expresses itself in almost every line he wrote. He alone of all the Orthodox mystics of the Middle Ages speaks openly of his own personal and intimate experiences; he describes his own visions; he does not fear to oppose the *spiritual experience* of the mystical life to certain traditional institutions of the Church.

Most of the ascetic and spiritual writings of the Christian East have, as is often observed, an impersonal character in their instructions on prayer. A John Climacus or a Maximus the Confessor never speaks of himself; they are conscious of belonging to a *school* of spirituality, that of the Church, and even when they

boldly say what others have not said, they claim that these original elements are only new expressions of the same tradition. Symeon is basically no exception to this rule, yet the *fact* of a personal encounter with God is so overwhelming to him that he troubles less than the others to put his writings in traditional form. In this respect he is like the great Western mystics.

Two elements in Symeon's work are of capital importance:

1. His affirmation of the primacy of the spiritual *experience*, especially when he describes his own conversion.
2. The intense realism of his Christocentric mysticism, especially his sacramental realism.

Here is an extract from Symeon's *Discourse* in which he describes his own monastic vocation:

*You drew me out of a fetid swamp; when I reached firm ground, You entrusted me to Your servant and Your disciple (Symeon the Pious, spiritual father of Symeon the "New"), bidding him to cleanse me from all stain. He led me by the hand as one leads a blind man to the fountain head, i.e. to the holy Scriptures and to Your divine commandments...One day when I was hurrying to plunge myself in my daily bath, You met me on the road, You who had already drawn me out of the mire. Then for the first time the pure light of Your divine Face shone before my weak eyes... From that day on, You returned often at the fountain source, You would plunge my head into the water, letting me see the splendor of Your light; then suddenly You would disappear, You would become invisible, and I still did not understand who You were...*

*Finally You deigned to reveal the dread mystery: one day when it seemed as though You were plunging me over and over again in the lustral waters, lightning flashes surrounded me. I saw the rays from Your face merge with the waters; washed by these radiant waters, I was carried out of myself and ravished in ecstasy.*



*For some time I lived in this state. Then by Your grace, I was granted to contemplate a still more awesome mystery. I saw You take me with Yourself, and rise to heaven; I knew not whether I was still in my body or not—You alone know, You who alone created me.*

*On coming back to myself, I wept in sorrowful surprise at my abandoned state. But soon You deigned to reveal Your face to me, like the sun shining in the open heavens, without form, without appearance, still not revealing who You were. How could I have known, unless You told me, for You vanished at once from my weak sight?...*

*Still weeping I went in search of You, the Unknown One. Crushed by sorrow and affliction, I completely forgot the world and all that is in the world, nothing of the senses remained in my mind. Then You appeared, You, the Invisible one, the Unattainable, the Intangible. I felt that You were purifying my intelligence, opening the eyes of my soul, allowing me to contemplate Your glory more fully, that You Yourself were growing in light...It seemed to me, O Lord, that You, the Immovable One, were moving, You, the unchanging One, were changing. You, the Faceless one, were taking features...You shone beyond all measure, You appeared to me wholly in all things, and I saw You clearly. Then I dared to ask You, saying: "Who are You, O Lord?"*

*For the first time You allowed me, a vile sinner, to hear the sweetness of Your voice. You spoke so tenderly that I trembled and was amazed, wondering how and why I had been granted Your gifts. You said to me: "I am the God who became man for love of you. You have desired me and sought me with your whole soul, therefore henceforth you shall be my brother, my friend, the co-heir of my glory..."*

*You said this and then were silent. Slowly You departed from me, O lovable and gentle Master, O my Lord Jesus Christ! (French trans. M.L.-B. in *Vie Spirituelle*, XXI, 1931, 305-309).*



Symeon, both a poet and mystic, expresses here in living imagery the essence of Christian experience: communion with the Incommunicable One and knowledge of the Unknowable One, made possible by the Incarnation of the Word who *draws* the creature out of sin and *grants* him divine life. That is precisely what Palamas was to express later by his distinction in God between essence and “energies.” Symeon is content to affirm the essential transcendence, describing how the creature trembles before the Mystery, while asserting the *fact* of revelation and of grace, the fact of face-to-face vision granted by the living God in Jesus Christ.

In the course of his life the “New Theologian” came into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities. They looked with suspicion on this visionary monk with his fiery defense of the ancient monastic practice of confession made to simple monks who were not priests (this “confession” was quite different from the sacrament of “penance”), and who questioned the efficacy of a baptism that produced no fruit...

The whole life of Symeon illustrates the conflict between Prophet and Priest, between the Experience and the Institution, known by so many other saints, like the Poor Man of Assisi in the West. Nevertheless, Symeon had an undeniable grasp of theology and profound knowledge of the Bible. Are there not many Pauline allusions in the account of his conversion quoted above? His opposition to all mechanical sacramentalism—a defect not generally to be found in the East—did not turn him to the “intellectual” mysticism of Evagrius nor toward Neoplatonic spiritualism. The sacraments of the Church were an integral part of his spiritual universe, and his prayers before and after Communion are among the most realistic found today in the Orthodox prayer book:

*He who shares in these graces  
Divine and deifying is  
No wise alone, but is with Thee,*



*The Resurrection. Mosaic, 14th c.,  
Church of the Holy Apostles, Thessalonica*



*"I partake rejoicing." Communion of the Apostles.  
Mosaic, 11th c., St Sophia, Kiev.*

*O Christ, Thou triply-radiant Light...  
And thus, confiding in Thy rich  
good deeds toward us, I partake—  
Rejoicing, trembling too, at once—  
Who am but grass, of fire and lo!  
—A wonder strange!—I am refreshed  
With dew, beyond all speech to tell  
(A Manual of Eastern Orthodox Prayers, New York, St  
Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991, pp. 72-74).*

*Thy whole Body, pure and divine, blazes with the fire of  
Thy divinity, ineffably united to it. Thou has granted, Lord,  
that this corruptible temple—my human flesh—be united to  
Thy holy flesh, that my blood mingle with Thine; from hence-  
forth I am a transparent and translucent member of Thy body...  
(Vie Spirituelle, XXI, 1931, p. 309).*

Symeon's genius expresses the religious value and authentic spiritual content of the mystical tradition of the monks of the East. By affirming the need of living contact with God, of conscious communion with Jesus, of the *experience of union* for every true Christian, the abbot of Saint Mamas made the exact nature of that union a problem which Palamas was to solve on the doctrinal level.



*Emperor Michael Paleologus.  
Miniature, 15th c.*

### BYZANTINE HESYCHASM UP TO THE THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH CENTURIES

It has often been said that the fourteenth-century hesychast revival in Byzantium originated in Sinai; that in the beginning of that century, Saint Gregory of Sinai brought the practice of the “prayer of the heart” to Athos. That is in fact the way Gregory’s biographer tells it. But he does this to enhance, by the exaggerations so dear to hagiographers, the role played by the saint whose memory he is honoring. Saint Gregory of Sinai was indeed of great importance—above all in the Slavic countries—for the diffusion of hesychasm in the fourteenth century; but other teachers share this function with him. As Palamas speaks of them more than of him, we must give them special attention.



*Karyes today. The capital of Mt Athos.*



There is one name in particular at the heart of all discussion about hesychasm: Nicephorus the Hesychast. Palamas calls him an "Italian," converted to Orthodoxy, who became a monk at Mount Athos; later in Constantinople he opposed the unionist politics of Emperor Michael VIII Paleologos (1261-1282). Nicephorus probably was, like many other "Italians" who came to Byzantium at this period, a Greek from Calabria or Sicily. We know nothing else of his life, save that he left a little treatise, *On Guarding the Heart*, and that he had many disciples among the spiritual elite at Byzantium. The hermitage in which he lived is usually said to have been near Karyes, the capital of Mount Athos.

We have quoted above texts of John Climacus, for whom the end of the hesychast life consists in "circumscribing the Incorporeal in the body" and in "linking the Name of Jesus to the breath." The *Spiritual Homilies* of the Pseudo-Macarius turned all hesychastic mysticism to consider body, soul and spirit as a single organism; sin alone breaks up this unity, making the body rebel against the spirit, handing over the spirit itself to wandering imagination, subjecting the body to the tyranny of passion. Christ came to reestablish the unity of the human composite; and by constantly recalling the Name of Jesus the hesychast makes the grace of redemption live within him. That this grace may be truly efficacious, he must make "his spirit return into his heart," that is, give it once more the place that was its own, the center of the psycho-physical organism, and thus reconstitute the original harmony between the parts of this organism.

In his treatise Nicephorus takes up these elements as a series of precepts or spiritual exercises. These precepts have been erroneously identified with hesychasm itself. On the contrary, even in the eyes of their author, they play only a secondary role. Nicephorus' treatise is in fact a florilegium of hagiographic and patristic texts in which an extract of the *Life of Saint Anthony* by Saint Athanasius of Alexandria rubs

shoulders with quotations from Macarius, John Climacus, Diadochus of Photice, Symeon the New Theologian, and other spiritual writers. Finally, in an appendix to the florilegium, the author quotes an interlocutor who asks him to define "attention" (*prosochê*) more precisely and to show him how to achieve it. According to the Fathers is not distraction of mind the major obstacle for the hesychast to overcome in order to achieve unceasing prayer? Is it possible to keep the Name of Jesus in the heart when the mind is assailed by impressions from the exterior world, when it is drawn by sin far from the



"We must look for a master." Miniature, 11th c.

place which God has assigned it, that is, the heart, whence it is able to "govern the whole organism"?

Nicephorus, using popular style and with no theological refinements, tells his interlocutor the most traditional means of conquering all difficulties: obedience to the counsels of a spiritual master. In conclusion he points out a practical way to follow if one is deprived of an experienced master:

*We must look for a master who is not himself in error: his lessons will show us when we go astray to right or left and our excess in the matter of attention...If you can find no one, pray to God in contrition of heart and with tears, appeal to him in your nakedness and do what I shall tell you.*

*You know that we breathe our breath in and out, only because of our heart...So, as I have said, sit down, recollect your mind, draw it—I am speaking of your mind—in your nostrils; that is the path the breath takes to reach the heart. Drive it, force it to go down to your heart with the air you are breathing in. When it is there, you will see the joy that follows: you will have nothing to regret. As a man who has been away from home for a long time cannot restrain his joy at seeing his wife and children again, so the spirit overflows with joy and unspeakable delights when it is united again to the soul...*

*Next you must know that as long as your spirit abides there, you must not remain silent nor idle. Have no other occupation or meditation than the cry of: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!" Under no circumstances give yourself any rest. This practice protects your spirit from wandering and makes it impregnable and inaccessible to the suggestions of the enemy and lifts it up every day in love and desire for God.*

*But if, in spite of all your efforts, brother, you do not succeed in entering your heart as I have directed, do what I tell you and with God's help you will achieve your end. You know that man's reason has its seat in the breast. In fact it is in our*

83  
 Ουαί μοι το γῆραι ἐν καιρῷ τοῦ προσάχου ἐκείνου  
 γὰρ ἐν προσάχῃ, ὅλῳ τὸ πᾶν τοῦ προσάχου  
 πᾶν πᾶν τοῦ + ὅλῳ. Εἰτε ἀνὴρ ἢ γυνή  
 • μὴ εἰς τὸ ὑποδύπῃ πατεῖν, εἰ γὰρ ὁ γυνὴ ποιεῖ  
 μὴ ἀποστῇ τοῦ ἀνδρός. ἔρῳ. Ἐὰν οὖν  
 μὴ εἰς ἡμῶν χαλῶ, πᾶν δὲ ἀναίμακτον πᾶν  
 γὰρ ἐν προσάχῃ ἀδαι. ὁ πᾶν. Διὰ τοῦτο εἴπῃ  
 ὁ ἀπόστολος διὰ πάντων προσάχῃ καὶ δὲ ὅλῳ.  
 ὅτι οὖν ὁλόκληρος εἰς μὴ ἀλλοτρίῳ οὐ μὲν  
 προσάχῃ ἀδιδῇ ὅλῳ προσάχῃ. καὶ ἵψῃ  
 ἢ ἐξ οὗτοῦ ἐλέγκοντες. ἡ γὰρ κηφόρου π  
 φυλακὴ καὶ δὲ αὐτὸς ὁ φελεῖ αὐτὸν.  
 Οἱ τοῦ μαχλοπρὸ τοῦ τοῦ σπῆνιμῳ ἵψῃ θε  
 ἰκνῶ φῶτε φανίαν τυχὲν ὄρω τῇ καὶ ἄλλῃ,  
 ὅσοι τοῦ ὁμῶν πῦρ καρδιακῶς ἐν ἀδελφῇ  
 δόξα ἀδελφὰ βούλεται, ὅσοι τὴν προσῆκατα  
 λαλῶν πείρου καὶ ἀδελφῇ τυχὲν ἀνὰ δόξαν.  
 ὅσοι τὸν ὁμῶν σαυροῦ τὸν ὁμῶν ἄρῃ τῶν καρδῶν  
 ἡμῶν κεκρυμμένον ἀρετῇ καὶ κτησάται,  
 ταῦτα οὐκ ἔστιν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀπὸ τῆς σαυρῆς. ὅσοι  
 ταῖς λαμπραῖς ταῖς ψυχικαῖς φανερῶν ὄντων  
 φθῆναι ἀπὸ τοῦ παρόντος, ταῦτα παρῶνται ἀπὸ  
 ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδελφῇ, ὅσοι ἐν γυνάξῃ καὶ πείρου τῇ τῶν  
 ὁμῶν κασιγῆς αὐτῶν ὁμῶν ὁμῶν οὐ σῆναι  
 καὶ καταβεβῆναι, δατέ καὶ δὲ τῇ ἡσυχίᾳ  
 ὁμῶν αὐτῶν ὁμῶν ὁμῶν ὁμῶν αὐτῶν αὐτῶν  
 τῇ ἡμῶν ὁμῶν ὁμῶν ὁμῶν αὐτῶν αὐτῶν

*breast that though our lips are silent, we speak, make decisions, compose prayers and psalms, etc... After putting all thoughts away from this rational power (it can be done; you need only to will it), present to it the prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me," and force it to utter these words interiorly, excluding all other thoughts. When in time you will have mastered this practice, it will undoubtedly open for you the entrance to the heart" (PG 147, 961-966; cf. Writings from the Philocalia, pp. 32-34).*

Nicephorus here makes very concrete and precise the role that Macarius had already assigned to the heart in prayer. His method of prayer is based on an anthropology which is like that of Macarius but which is derived primarily from Semitic origins. The Biblical concept of man as an indivisible psycho-physical unity here triumphs in the monastic spirituality of Byzantium, in spite of centuries of temptation by Neoplatonistic dualism! In fact the bodily ascesis proposed by Nicephorus springs from "that very simple fact that all psychic activity has a somatic repercussion. In a very real though imperceptible manner the body shares in every movement of the soul whether it be emotion, abstract thought, volition or even transcendent experience" (A. Bloom, *Contemplation et ascèse, Études Carmélitaines*, 1949, p. 54). The purely physiological concepts presupposed by some of his expressions are the most doubtful element in Nicephorus. But the physiology itself is of course very like that of the Bible. "The heart is the ruling organ; it holds the hegemony of the body, and the Creator has made it the source of the body's natural heat; in conjunction with the lungs, which have a cooling effect, it acts in breathing and in speech" (Guillaumont, *Le sens du nom de coeur dans l'Antiquité, Études Carmélitaines*, 1950, p. 77). However Nicephorus does not make this physiology essential in his spirituality; the psycho-physiological method is only one means among others to achieve *attention* or *custody of the heart*

which, although a necessary condition for true prayer, is neither its essence nor its ultimate goal.

The prayer of the Christian hesychast here differs fundamentally from Hindu *Yoga* and Islamic *Dhikr*—techniques that lead more or less automatically to the desired mystical state. In the thirteenth century many personal contacts were made between Christian monks and Islam: texts such as lives of the saints or writings of Philotheus and Gregory Palamas provide numerous examples. A prayer of the divine Name linked with respiration was so widespread in Islamic circles that no one can deny reciprocal compenetration of the two spiritual ways. (See the study of L. Gardet, "Un problème de mystique comparée: la mention du Nom divin—*dhikr*—dans la mystique musulmane," *Revue Thomiste*, III, 1952, 642-679; IV, 1953, 197-216.) But this parallelism only emphasizes the contrast between the Moslem custom and the Christian interpretation of the same psychological phenomenon. With the Christian monks—in spite of changes and confusion, unavoidable in popular milieu—the prayer of the breath became inseparably bound up with sacramental mysticism and a theology of grace.

Many Byzantine treatises on the spiritual life from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have recourse, with some variations, to the same precepts as Nicephorus. They appear in the *Method of Holy Attention*, an anonymous work falsely attributed to Symeon the New Theologian, and also in Saint Gregory of Sinai, and in Callistus and Ignatius of Xanthopoulos. Moreover Palamas tells us that the two greatest personalities of the religious world of Byzantium at the end of the thirteenth century, Patriarch Athanasius I and Theoleptus, Metropolitan of Philadelphia, recommended these precepts to their spiritual disciples (*Triads* I, 2, p. 12; II, 2, p. 3). This indicates the very wide influence of hesychast spirituality; it also shows its true nature. Neither Theoleptus nor Athanasius were

hermits, shut up in a cloister or hidden in a desert; both on the contrary are linked with social and spiritual reforms of Christian society and throughout their whole career sought to encourage an ecclesial community and sacramental spirit in Byzantium. They themselves and their successors therefore reveal that fourteenth-century hesychasm was not an individualistic mystical movement, but a spiritual renewal, based on patristic tradition. Thus through figures like Athanasius and Theoleptus, the Christocentric mysticism of the Jesus prayer took on the dimensions of the whole Church; in the work of Gregory Palamas, it was to find its theology.

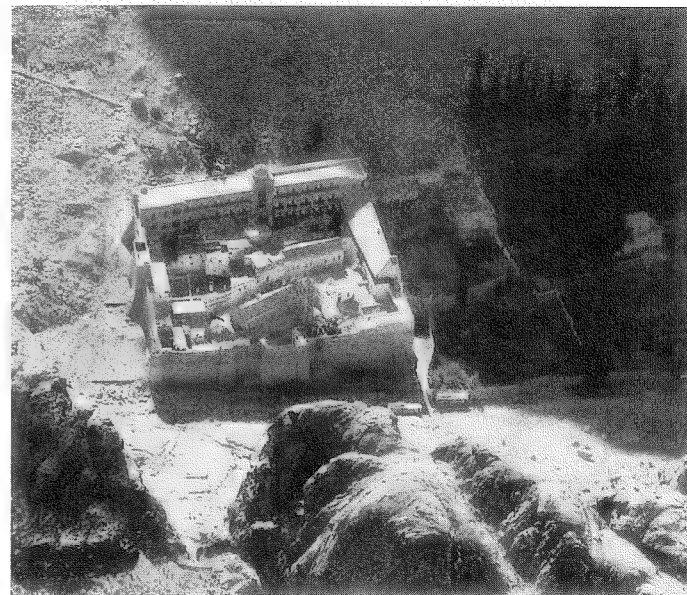
Before coming to the great hesychast doctor himself, however, we must speak of a man whose spiritual influence was to prepare the way for Palamas' success in Byzantium and also in the Slavic lands: Gregory of Sinai (1255-1346).

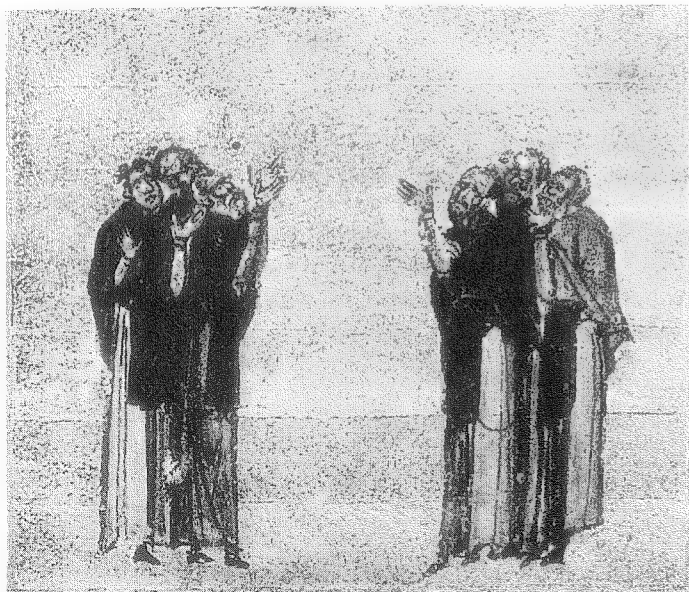
Gregory came from Asia Minor but his long stay at the monastery of Sinai, where the tradition of John Climacus was still alive, explains his surname. The Patriarch Callistus, his biographer, tells us that he divided his time there between prayer and study and that his knowledge far surpassed that of all the monks of the monastery. Yet it was not at Sinai but in Crete, where he lived later, that he learned the "custody of the mind" and "pure prayer" from a monk named Arsenius. He then went to Mount Athos, where he became the head of the Magula Skete and was soon surrounded by many disciples. Around 1325 the Athonite monks living outside the protective ramparts of the great monasteries were victims of constant attacks by the Turks. Gregory was forced to leave Athos and finally found refuge in Paroria, in the mountains of Thrace, at the boundary of the Byzantine Empire and of Bulgaria, where he was protected by the Bulgarian Czar John Alexander. Hesychasm then began to spread from Paroria throughout the Slavic countries. The future creators of the Slavic spiritual and intellectual renaissance were in fact among the Sinaite's direct or indirect

disciples: Theodosius of Trnovo, the Bulgarian Patriarch Euthymius, and Cyprian the Metropolitan of Kiev. They brought hesychasm to Russia, where it inspired the famous fifteenth-century movement of the Transvolgian "Startzi."

The writings of Saint Gregory the Sinaite have always been very popular among Orthodox monks. Gregory, who was imbued with the precepts of the *Ladder*, presents the spiritual doctrine of pure prayer with a deep understanding of the psychology of monks; he exploits all the experience accumulated by earlier generations. Hence his writings are very concentrated in character, mystical experiences and concrete advice

*Sinai: the Monastery of St Catherine.*





"To remember God." Miniature, 11th c.

are presented together. The whole hesychast tradition seems condensed into single brief passages, such as the following:

*It is ordained that man must put before all things the universal commandment—to remember God—of which it is said: "Thou shalt remember the Lord thy God" (Deut 8:18). For, by the reverse of that which destroys us, we may be secure. What destroys us is forgetfulness of God, which shrouds the commandments in darkness and despoils us of all good (Writings from the Philokalia, p. 40).*

This "remembrance of God" that is essential for true life and has been corrupted by sin is precisely what the hesychast

must reestablish in himself. To do this he must eliminate every "thought" save that of God.

*The origin and cause of thoughts lies in the splitting up, by man's transgression, of his single and simple memory, which has thus lost the memory of God, and, becoming multiple instead of simple and varied instead of single, has fallen prey to its own forces.*

*To cure this original memory of the deceitful and harmful memory of thoughts means to bring it back to its ancient simplicity...Memory can be cured by a constant memory of God, consolidated by the action of prayer...(Writings from the Philokalia, p. 48).*

The fourteenth-century masters of hesychasm did not have the same negative attitude to psalmody. Theoleptus of Philadelphia in particular urged strongly that his disciples follow rigorously the precepts of the monastic community; and Patriarch Philotheus tells us that once, when Palamas thought he should go apart into solitude for "pure prayer," he was sternly reproved by a vision of Saint Anthony, who sent him back to join his brethren in the common prayer. Gregory of Sinai seems, then, to have followed the most individualistic and spiritualized tendency of Byzantine hesychasm and to be closest to Evagrius of Pontus. It is probably no accident that he kept totally aloof from the dogmatic controversy on monastic spirituality that burst out in the last years of his life. Yet it is also true that his closest followers—Callistus, Mark, David Dishypatus—all supported Palamas. In any case, Gregory must have sympathized with his brethren, the monks, in their conflict with the Barlaamite humanists, for he himself recommended the union of prayer with breathing and explicitly referred to the Pseudo-Symeon's *Method* of bodily prayer. The tradition of Macarius and Symeon the New Theologian was still too alive for him to be unfaithful to it, in spite of the "Evagriian" character of his spirituality. Therefore we find pas-



sages in his writings, as in all the other contemporary hesychasts, which unite the whole mysticism of the Name of Jesus and the whole spiritual way of pure prayer to sacramental life in Jesus Christ. The end of the hesychast life was for him, as for all the others, essentially the same as that set before all Christians by the Scriptures: to become conscious of the grace of baptism, already granted to man but hidden from him by sin.





Baptism. Miniature, 11th c.

*By our negligence and bad habits most of us fall into insensibility and blindness and do not even know that God exists, or what we are, what we have become as sons of God, sons of light, children and members of Christ. Were we baptized as adults? We saw only the water and not the Spirit. Even if we have been reborn in the Spirit our faith is dead and inactive...We have become flesh and we live according to the flesh...There are two ways of finding the activity (energy) of the Spirit that we received sacramentally in Holy Baptism:*

*(a) By the observance of the commandments and at the price of long efforts we may achieve in a general way a revelation of this gift...*

*(b) It is revealed in a life of obedience (to a spiritual father), by the methodic and continual calling upon the Lord Jesus, that is, by the remembrance of God.*



*A hesychast's dwelling on Mount Athos today.*

*The first way is longer, the second is very short, provided that the soul has learned to dig the ground courageously and perseveringly in search of the hidden gold (On Contemplation and Prayer, in J. Gouillard, *Petite Philocalie*, pp. 241, 244).*

One of Gregory of Sinai's chief concerns was to guard his followers against imaginary visions, which may at times be natural but more often are diabolic in origin.

*Watch with care and intelligence, you lover of God. When, while you work, you see within or without you a light or a flame, or an image—of Christ, for example, or of an angel, or*



*Monks praying, Miniature, 11th c.*

*of someone else—do not accept it lest you suffer harm. And do not yourself create fantasies, nor pay attention to those that create them, nor allow your mind to take their impression. For all those things, being impressed and imagined from without, aim at seducing your soul. The true beginning of prayer is warmth of the heart, which scorches passions, fills the heart with the joy and delight of unshakable love and strengthens it with sure conviction (Writings from the Philokalia, p. 90).*

Here Gregory of Sinai is insisting on an essential aspect of the Orthodox mystical tradition: the most dangerous enemy to union with God is imagination in any shape or form, voluntary or involuntary. There is a curious likeness between this Eastern spiritual doctrine and Simone Weil's concept of the imagination "which fills up the cracks through which grace could penetrate..." The monks were not seeking a subjective state but *contact with an*

*object.* The effects of this contact—warmth of heart, joy, sense of fullness—are real but differ essentially from a corresponding subjective feeling, since they are manifestations of the active presence of God, not merely states of the soul.

This is the precise point where all evidence indicates that hesychasm is not only a school of spirituality, but also a doctrine inescapably linked to that spirituality. We must turn then to the theologian of hesychasm, Saint Gregory Palamas.

*Monks praying, Miniature, 11th c.*





## Gregory Palamas Theologian of Hesychasm

### YOUTH

Palamas was born in 1296; his parents were of noble birth, originally from Asia Minor but driven by the Turkish invasions to Constantinople. He grew up at the court of Emperor Andronicus II Paleologus. Andronicus was a patron of writers and scholars, an intellectual, though a mediocre politician. Yet he was also the most religious of the late Byzantine rulers. By his humility of heart and obedience to the severe patriarch Athanasius I, he embodied the ideal of theocracy, the theoretical basis of the Byzantine Empire, that is symbolically portrayed in the ninth-century mosaic over the "royal door" in the narthex of Santa Sophia, where the Christian Emperor, king of this world, lies prostrate before Christ the Pantocrator, Incarnate Wisdom, the Heavenly Emperor. Palamas' biographer describes the atmosphere of the Byzantine court around 1300. He tells how the father of the future hesychast master, as he sat in the Senate, being absorbed in "intellectual prayer" did not hear the Emperor question him on a political problem. Andronicus respected his recollection and did not insist on hearing his opinion!

Until Gregory was about twenty years old, he was engaged in secular studies, the basic classical *trivium* and *quadrivium*, which gave him a considerable knowledge of Aristotle. The metaphysics of Plato were considered by the traditionalistic Byzantine world to be incompatible with Christianity and therefore were not allowed in the ordinary curriculum of secular studies. Not infrequently Palamas speaks of Aristotelian logic as a pure exercise, a technique of reasoning that is useful and legitimate for a Christian. But in his mind Plato's meta-





*Emperor Andronicus II.*

physical doctrine implied an intellectual choice and commitment, a commitment that Palamas was proud to have rejected.

About 1316, Gregory suddenly decided to follow the monastic vocation, inspired by contact with eminent monks in Constantinople. Theoleptus of Philadelphia had explicitly invited him to "pure prayer." In vain the emperor promised him a brilliant career; he decided to leave the world. In a typically medieval and Byzantine manner, he eliminated all family obstacles to his career. As a child, he had lost his father (who had been clothed in the monastic habit before his death); therefore he was responsible for his mother, two sisters, two brothers and a large number of servants. His solution was that all of them should enter monastic life. So his mother, his two sisters, and many servants entered monasteries in the capital, and the three boys set

out together on foot for Mount Athos. There for twenty years Gregory led a monastic life that differed very little in the fourteenth century from life today on the "Holy Mountain."

The monasteries of Athos are not the oldest in the East. The "Great Lavra" was founded only in the tenth century by Saint Athanasius; during the following centuries many other great monastic houses were established there and all were grouped in a kind of federation, under the authority of a "protos" who presided over the council of abbots of the various convents. Similar federations existed elsewhere—on Mount Olympus, on Mount Saint Auxentius—but the Turkish invasion of Asia Minor put Athos in a position of unique importance, increased by its multi-national character: Serbians, Bulgarians, Georgians (or "Iberians") and Russians sent monks there, sometimes to enter the great Greek monasteries, other times to establish their own foundations. There was even a Latin monastery on Mount Athos until the thirteenth century, that of the "Amalfitans" (nearly all the monks came from the Italian town of Amalfi); today its ruins still bear witness to the ancient union of East and West in asceticism and prayer...

In the fourteenth century, Athos was the center of all Orthodox monasticism. It was also an intellectual center, as we can see even today by the inexhaustible wealth of Athonite libraries. The years spent there by the future doctor of hesychasm were not only a spiritual training for him but also an opportunity to gain very wide knowledge of patristic literature and profound experience of the various problems of monastic life. Throughout the whole history of Mount Athos the communal or "cenobitic" tradition of monasticism was in conflict with that of anchoritism or hesychasm. The two traditions had always existed side by side in the East; both go back to the Egyptian origins of Christian monasticism.

Cenobitism, first brought to Mount Athos by St. Athanasius in the tenth century, is the form of monasticism popularized in





*Community Life.*

the West by St Benedict. The vows of chastity obedience and poverty are carried out in the heart of a closely organized community, whose strict rules determine precisely the least detail in the monk's life. Liturgical prayer, obedience to the abbot, and absolute despoilment of all personal possessions are its essential elements. Anchoritism, on the contrary, as practiced from the time of St. Anthony of Egypt by many ascetics, left the monk full of liberty to follow his own way to perfection: the hermits or hesychasts moreover felt that they alone were true "monks" in the etymological and primitive sense of the word (from the Greek *monos*, alone). Their spiritual way was also essentially one of chastity, but the interpretation of the vows of obedience and poverty differed from that of the anchorites.

The absolute spiritual master was not the abbot but an experienced monk, *freely chosen*; and material possessions were not handed over to the community—which often became very rich and could guarantee the monks a comfortable, sometimes even a lazy life—but rather they were renounced in a radical way that made poverty more personal and more concrete. Both ways have obvious advantages; both involved hindrances and dangers. On the one hand, discipline could remain purely exterior, lacking any true spirituality and sometimes based on flagrant social injustice (for the cenobitic monasteries were great landowners, making extensive use of slave labor); on the other lay the possibility of ending in spiritual anarchy with excessive individualism and over-spiritualization of monasticism.

Byzantine monasticism, especially after the eleventh century, tended in practice to combine the two ways. Hesychast spirituality was not unknown in the greatest cenobitic monasteries, for the *gerontes*—confessors and spiritual fathers—exercised, at the very heart of the community observance, an authority parallel to the administrative and disciplinary power of the abbot. The life of Symeon the New Theologian shows us several examples of this. And, in turn, hesychasts often followed a semi-communal form of life: a few monks would group around a spiritual master, practicing asceticism and prayer together, going on Saturdays and Sundays to the monastic community on which they were dependent to participate in the liturgy and receive the sacraments.

This last is the manner of life that Palamas chiefly followed on Mount Athos. The hesychast tradition as it functioned in the fourteenth century believed in fact that this was the highest way, following here the authority of John Moschus (*Pratum Spirituale*, chap. 4 and 5). Moreover Palamas criticized exaggerated hesychasm, especially when it led to contempt for the liturgical life, and at intervals he himself lived in the large community.



*Mount Athos: Vatopedi.*

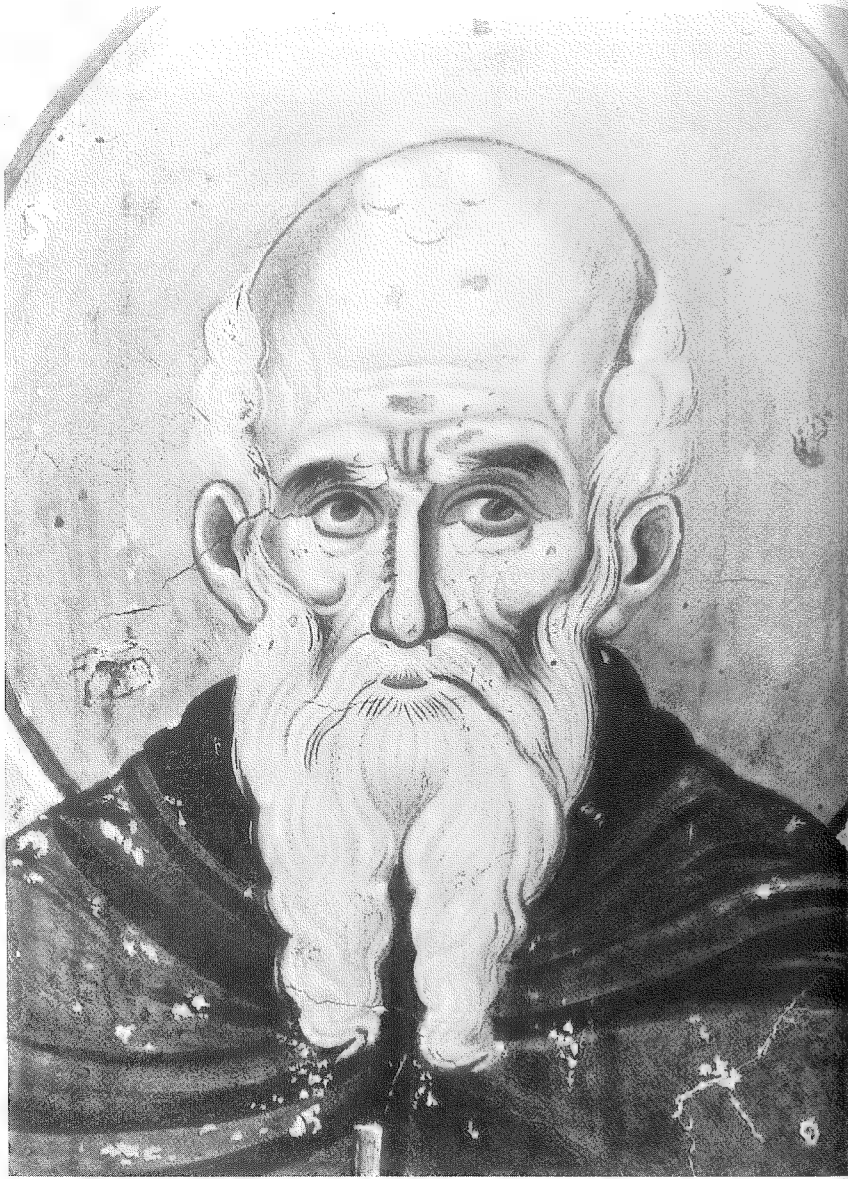
The three brothers remained near the monastery of Vatopedi for three years, under the direction of a hesychast called Nicodemus who had come to Athos from Mount Saint Auxentius, another important monastic center in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But after the premature death of his youngest brother, Theodosius, followed soon by that of Nicodemus, Gregory and his other brother, Macarius, penetrated further into the interior of the Athonite peninsula, staying at the Great Lavra of Saint Athanasius, the monastery that held primacy of age and authority at the heart of the Athonite federation. The "Lavra" was thus to be Palamas' spiritual mother-house all his life long.

The future hesychast master first entered the monastic community and was even appointed master of chant by the abbot.

After three years he withdrew to the hermitage of Glossia to live under the direction of an eminent monk called Gregory. Incessant raids of Turkish pirates, from which the little monastic groups suffered most because of their lack of those protecting walls that even today make the Athonite convents resemble fortresses, put an end to this eremitical life. Palamas, followed by a whole group of monks, decided to go to the Holy Land and to Sinai. In spite of the Muslim conquest, such pilgrimages were frequent and much favored by monks, who therefore came to know better than others the relatively favorable conditions of life guaranteed to Christians by the Muslims of that time. The monks were even affected by certain spiritual trends in Islam; the chief evidence of this spiritual osmosis,



*Mount Athos: The Great Lavra.*



*St Athanasius of Athos.  
Fresco by Panselinos, 15th c., Protaton, Mount Athos.*

which was largely the work of popular monasticism, is, as we have seen, the psycho-physical method of prayer.

However Palamas was prevented from carrying out his project. He stayed for some time at Thessalonika, joining there a kind of spiritual circle under the leadership of Isidore, a disciple of Gregory of Sinai and future patriarch of Constantinople. This circle was very active among varied social groups, for, like Symeon the New Theologian and Theoleptus of Philadelphia, Isidore and Gregory did not think that hesychast spirituality was the exclusive domain of monks. They sought to spread the practice of the Jesus prayer outside the cloisters, for to them it was the preeminent means of making the grace of baptism real and efficacious.

Gregory was ordained priest at Thessalonika when he was thirty years old. He then founded a hermitage near Berrhoea, which he governed and where he practiced extremely rigorous asceticism for five years. He lived five days of the week in complete isolation; on Saturdays and Sundays he would join his brethren to celebrate the Eucharist and to talk with them. This stay at Berrhoea was broken only by a short trip to Constantinople when his mother died. He brought back with him his two sisters and put them in Berrhoean convents.

Around 1331, he finally returned to Athos, for Serbian raids were constantly ravaging the area of Berrhoea. He decided to live in the hermitage of Saint Sabbas, near the Lavra. The monks still point out today the location of that cell, where later a chapel was built. Saint Sabbas is high above the monastery, clinging to the steep flank of Mount Athos. It takes about an hour of difficult climbing up the mountain path to reach it. Palamas continued there the way of life he had adopted at Berrhoea, spending the week in solitude, going down to the monastery only for liturgical feasts. We see here that very remarkable balance between personal spiritual life and community prayer that hesychasm achieved in the fourteenth century and that in large measure determined Palamas' theological thought.



Gregory's stay in St Sabbas was interrupted in 1335-1336 for a brief period. At the time he was appointed by the Athonite authorities as abbot of a large monastery, Esphigmenou, on the north of the peninsula, having in those days almost two hundred monks. The young abbot's zeal for reform soon aroused the antagonism of the community. So Palamas returned to Saint Sabbas where new anxieties awaited him.



*The hermitage of St Sabbas today.*



*Lavra, seen from St Sabbas.*

### THE CONTROVERSY WITH BARLAAM AND AKINDYNUS

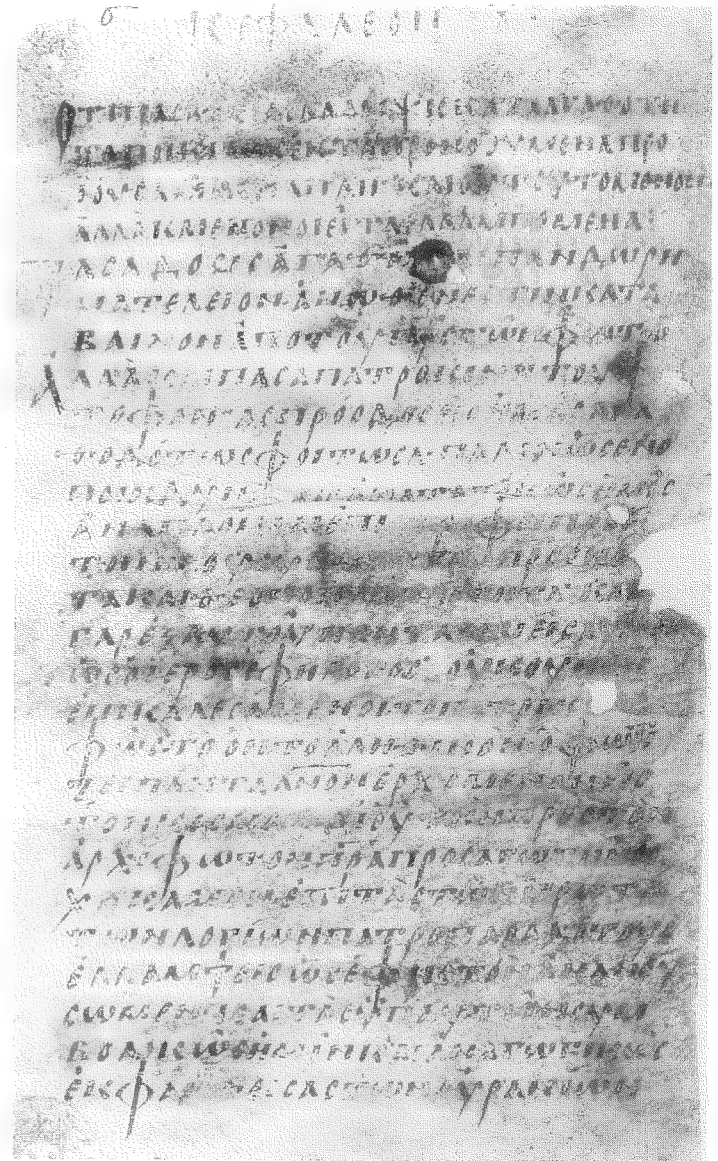
We will not say much of the purely historical episodes of this famous controversy, whose outcome was ultimately to determine the destiny of Eastern Christianity. Here are the main stages.

Barlaam, a Calabrian Greek, went to Constantinople in 1338 and then quickly won fame as a scholar and philosopher. His writings on astronomy and logic became well known in Byzantium, and John Cantacuzenos, the "Grand Domestic" of Andronicus III—a kind of prime minister—appointed him to a

chair at the imperial university. Here Barlaam commented for his students on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, that mysterious fifth-century personality disguised under the name of St. Paul's Athenian convert. The writings of Dionysius, widely circulated in the East, were known also in the West from 827, when the Byzantine Emperor Michael II sent the text to Louis the Pious. This precious manuscript, still to be seen today in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, was the Greek text most widely read by medieval Latin philosophers. In 1333-1334 the Calabrian acted as spokesman for the Greek church in conversations with two Dominican theologians sent by the Pope to the East to work for reunion of the churches. In 1339 he was entrusted with a mission to Benedict XII at Avignon. A foreigner would certainly never have won such signs of confidence from the Byzantine government had he not given clear proof of his fidelity to Orthodoxy and the interests of the Empire. In fact Barlaam had always professed his Orthodox convictions: his very "love of true piety" had led him to leave Italy where, whether they wanted it or not, the Greeks were in fact united to Rome. Thus he thought of himself as returning to the faith of his fathers.

He soon found himself in difficulties, however, when he began theological innovations. He had grown up and received his early formation in an Italy where the spirit of the Renaissance was already in ferment. The humanistic circles in which he had moved were seeking to free themselves from the intellectual discipline established in the Middle Ages and which is symbolized and embodied in the Thomist school of theology.

William of Ockham owed his success in the West during the fourteenth century precisely to this desire to emancipate human thought from medieval "authorities," an emancipation that in the end would lead to the Protestant Reformation. We do not know whether Barlaam had any direct acquaintance with the nominalist philosophy of Ockham; in any case, it was



*The manuscript of Ps.-Dionysius offered in 827 by the Byzantine Emperor to the Emperor of the Franks.*



in the name of nominalism that, from his first theological writing against Latin theology—for him identified with “Thomas”—he rejected the Latin claim to “know” God and to “prove” the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son. His own “apophaticism,” that is, his constant assertion of the unknowability of God, was what drew him to Eastern theology. Hence it was no accident that he devoted himself with such assiduity to the study of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Eastern doctor of apophatic theology whose authority was equally great in the West. In Dionysius he finally found a metaphysical basis for the reunion of the churches: since God is unknowable, why go on disputing about the procession of the Holy Spirit? The Greeks hold that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone; the Latins defend their seventh-century addition to the Creed (the *Filioque*) by claiming that he proceeds also from the Son. This is sheer presumption on both sides, but especially on that of the Latins:

*Thomas and everyone who reasons as he does thinks that there is nothing inaccessible to the human mind; that we believe that this opinion comes from a soul of demoniacal and evil pride; for most divine things transcend human knowledge (Text in Paris Gr. Manuscript 1278, fol. 137).*

This nominalistic agnosticism with which Barlaam first attacked the Latins called forth remonstrances from the hermit at Saint Sabbas. From his Athonite retreat Palamas sent letter after letter to Constantinople and Thessalonika, now to one of his foremost disciples, Akindynus, now to the Calabrian philosopher himself. God is indeed unknowable but does He not reveal Himself? Has not Christ by becoming incarnate granted men a supernatural knowledge, distinct from intellectual knowledge, but eminently real, much more real than any philosophical knowledge? In his flight from the intellectual realism of Western Thomistic scholasticism, Barlaam clashed with the mystical realism of the Eastern monks.

He had an inquiring mind, this Calabrian philosopher, and sought to find out more about his new adversaries. So he shared for a while the life of hesychast hermitages at Thessalonika and at Constantinople. There he met the most popularized form of the psycho-physical method of prayer; it profoundly shocked both his humanistic mentality and his philosophical convictions, imbued with Platonic spirituality.

*I have been initiated by them, he wrote, in monstrosities and in absurd doctrines that a man with any intelligence or even a little sense, cannot lower himself to describe, products of erroneous belief and rash imagination. They taught me almost marvelous separations and reunions of mind and soul, the relations of the demon with the latter, the differences between red and white lights, the intelligible entrances and exits produced by the nostrils while breathing, the shields around the navel and, finally, the vision of Our Lord with the soul that is produced within the navel in a perceptible manner with full certitude of heart...(Letter V to Ignatius, ed. G. Schiro, in Barlaam Calabro, Epistole Greche, Palermo, 1954, pp. 323-324).*

It is difficult to distinguish in this text what is a direct echo of the treatise of Nicephorus the Hesychast *On Guarding the Heart* or of the Pseudo-Symeon's *Method*, and what is a popular corruption of their precepts or even Barlaam's own satire. The Calabrian philosopher in any case took his discoveries very seriously and identified the hesychast monks with Messalian or “Bogomil” heretics, then very numerous in the Balkans. He launched a series of polemical treatises against them in which he dropped all superfluous attacks on their spiritual practices and instead developed his doctrine of the knowledge of God, his concept of prayer and mysticism. He showed himself well acquainted with all Eastern thought that corroborated his intellectualism and his nominalism, especially the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and the spiritualist mysticism of Evagrius. Finally he made explicit the accusation that he

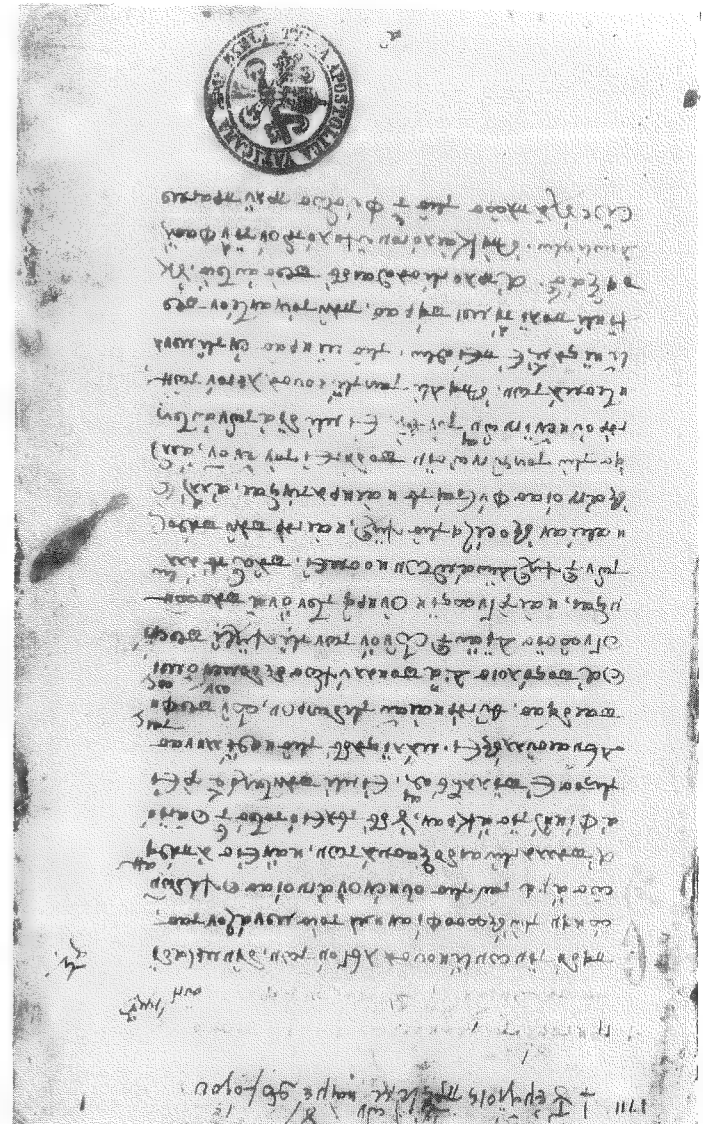
had brought against the monks from the beginning, that of Messalianism: for in fact they pretended to see the divine essence with bodily eyes! To read certain passages of Barlaam one would think Evagrius himself were speaking!

*He who applies himself to prayer must quiet the senses and entirely put to death the passionate part of the soul so that none of his powers may act; so too with all activity common to soul and body; for each of these activities is an obstacle to prayer, especially in the measure in which it involves some physical effort, gives pleasure or pain, particularly in regard to the grossest and most irrational sense, that of touch (Quoted by Palamas in his Triads II, 2 § 4, ed. Meyendorff in Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, Louvain, 1959, p. 324).*

The monks claim to see God Himself; but direct vision of God is impossible!

*If they agree to say, Barlaam writes, that the intelligible and immaterial light of which they speak is the superessential God himself and if they continue at the same time to acknowledge that he is absolutely invisible and inaccessible to the senses, they must face a choice: if they claim to see this light, they must consider it to be either an angel or the essence of the mind itself, when, purified of passion and of ignorance, the spirit sees itself and in itself sees God in his own image. If the light of which they speak is identified with one of these two realities, then their thought must be held to be perfectly correct and conformed to Christian tradition. But if they say that this light is neither the superessential essence, nor an angelic essence, nor the mind itself, but that the mind contemplates it as another hypostasis, for my part, I do not know what that light is, but I do know that it does not exist (Quoted *ibid.* II, 3 § 7, pp. 400-402).*

It was against these writings of the Calabrian philosopher that in his hermitage of Saint Sabbas and later at Thessalonika Gregory Palamas composed his famous *Triads for the Defense*



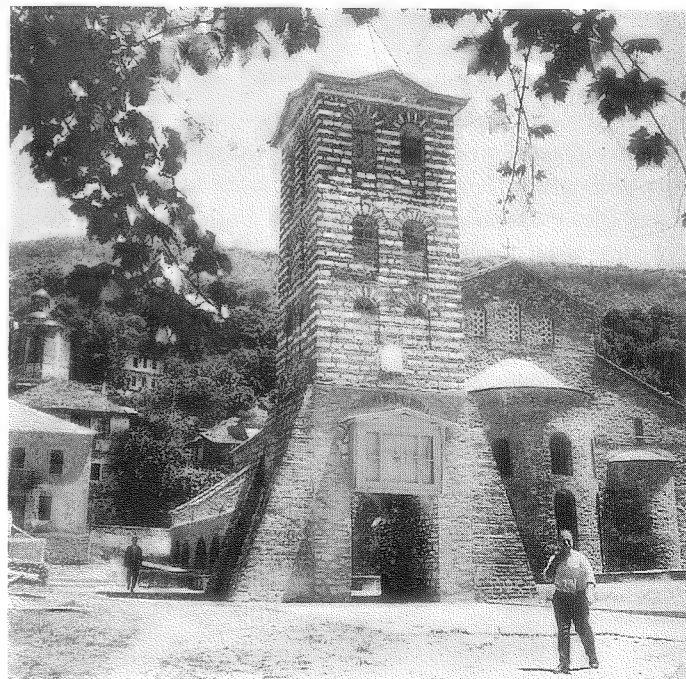
*The Triads. Manuscript, 14th c.*

of the *Holy Hesychasts*. These crucial texts present the first theological synthesis of Eastern monastic spirituality. Barlaam's attacks thus provided the Orthodox Church with the occasion of making explicit, through a spokesman in whom it recognized itself, the place of hesychasm in relation to its central dogmas of sin, the Incarnation, Redemption and the grace of the sacraments. Likewise it made a necessary selection from earlier tradition, eliminating elements clearly heterogeneous to its own spiritual way especially Neoplatonic spirituality—and integrating practices and doctrines congruent with a Biblical and Christian concept of God and of man. Finally, in answer to Barlaam's accusation of Messalianism that reproached the monks for "seeing the divine essence with the eyes of the body," the Byzantine councils of the fourteenth century adopted the Palamite distinction between the divine essence and energies.

The approval by the Church of Gregory's theology went through several steps. The interior political struggles that were tearing the already unstable empire of the Paleologues to pieces delayed the definitive decision for several years.

The first official or semi-official document published against Barlaam was the *Hagiorite Tome*, composed by Palamas himself and signed in 1340-1341 by the abbots and monks of the Holy Mountain (*hagion ores*) of Athos, gathered in assembly (*synaxis*) at the Protaton of Karyes. All Athonite monasticism thus took a stand against the nominalistic humanism of Barlaam and acknowledged Gregory Palamas as its authorized spokesman. In the *Tome*, as in the *Triads*, Palamas made Christian mysticism part of the divine plan of salvation. God makes himself *really* visible because in the Church the Kingdom of the world to come really exists already in anticipation, even as Christ revealed Himself before the time to the Just of the Old Law. Here is the beginning of this important text:

*The doctrines that are today a common heritage, known by all and preached openly, were mysteries under the Mosaic*



Karyes: Protaton

*Law, and made accessible beforehand only to the vision of the prophets. So too the good things which the saints proclaim for the world to come, are the mysteries of the evangelical society, for the Spirit makes the saints worthy of the vision and they receive these good things and see them ahead of time, as first fruits.*

Christian holiness is thus essentially prophetic: the Old Testament prophets knew and proclaimed the first coming of Christ, those of the New Covenant know and proclaim the glorious Parousia of the Lord; they experience the fullness of the promises made to every Christian at baptism, they manifest the

Mystery of Salvation not only in words but by their very life. This prophetic ministry belongs especially to the monks whom Barlaam had attacked:

*Some of them have experienced true initiation—all those who have forsaken enjoyment of material possessing, human glory and corrupt bodily pleasure, choosing instead the evangelical life; those who have also intensified this abandonment of the world by obedience to those who have already reached full manhood in Christ, free from all responsibility save for their own rigorous attention and pure prayer, reaching even God himself in a Mystical and supra-intellectual union with him,—they have been initiated into that which transcends the human mind. Others have received initiation through the reverence, confidence and love they have professed toward such men...This deifying grace of God, according to the words of the godly Maximus in speaking of Melchisedek, is uncreated, eternal, proceeding from the eternal God...*

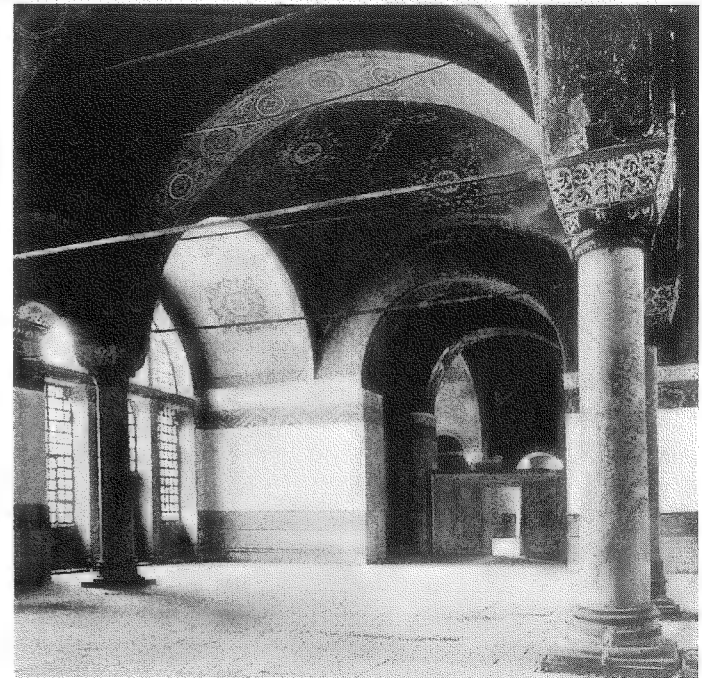
*Such is the teaching of Scripture; such is the tradition of the Fathers; such is our own humble experience. As we here learned that the most venerable hieromonk, our brother the Lord Gregory Palamas, had written this in defense of the holy hesychasts, we declare that his writings all rigorously conform to the traditions of the saints... (PG 150, 1225-1230)*

This solemn declaration of the monks of Athos was to be decisive for the outcome of the controversy.

Two councils called successively in June and August of 1341 in the galleries of Santa Sophia at Constantinople condemned the Calabrian philosopher. His hopes of finding in the East the homeland of ancient Hellenism were not realized; his humanistic gifts and his Platonistic convictions were to find a far wider audience in the West. He preferred, therefore, to return to Italy. There he was named bishop of Gerace and spent his old age giving Petrarch lessons in Greek. In condemning Barlaam, the Byzantine church had condemned the spirit of the Renaissance.

Yet the brief Byzantine career of the Calabrian philosopher was possible only because his ideas found at least a partially favorable hearing in certain circles. The nominalism that Barlaam pushed to its extreme conclusions corresponded with the intimate convictions of many Byzantine humanists. The intellectual elite of the East had been passing for a long time through an internal crisis, sometimes concealed by the rigid framework of the Byzantine way of life and by exterior fidelity to the dogmas of the "seven Ecumenical Councils," which willy-nilly the intellectual was forced to accept. But behind the facade of seeming

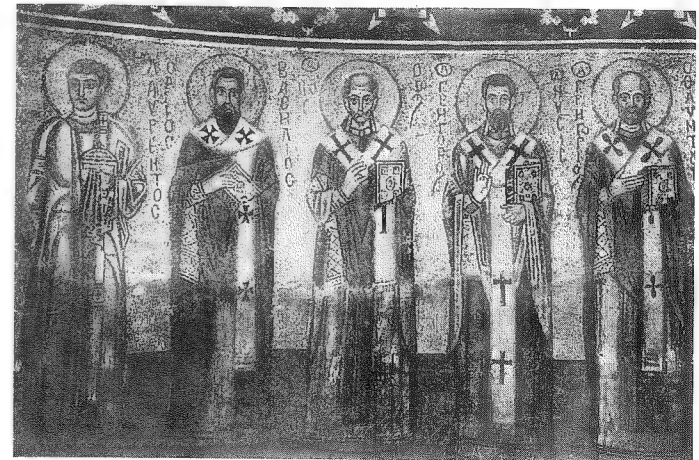
*The Galleries of St Sophia, Constantinople.*





agreement, from the ninth century on, a constant conflict was waged between the advocates of a secular Hellenism that sought to restore the Neoplatonic tradition of philosophy to the greatest possible autonomy in relation to the Christian dogma, and the defenders of spiritual and theological teaching that sought to be purely Christian and independent of the ancient philosophers. A Westerner might perhaps wonder where the conflict would be. Could not the two movements coexist, allowing theology and philosophy their own separate domains? But this divorce established by the West in the Middle Ages could never be accepted in the East. On the one hand, the Neoplatonism that attracted the Byzantine humanists was essentially a religious system and therefore involved some degree of control over the domain of theology. On the other hand, the adversaries of secular Hellenism had inherited a system of thought from the Greek Fathers that could allow no human activity—and especially no intellectual activity—outside the essential Christian experience of life in Jesus Christ. Hence they did not see philosophy as an autonomous domain where human thought could move in the framework of non-Christian principles. In fact, we have seen the progressive victory at the very heart of the hesychast tradition of a monistic concept of man—the whole man, fallen and mortal, who as a whole man, in body and in soul, is called even here below to enjoy the first fruits of final deification.

From the ninth to the fourteenth century the Church often adopted a static attitude, determined by the formal conservatism of official theology, toward the conflict between these two trends. Many Byzantines—including most of the episcopate—believed, especially after the peace won by the Church in the 843 victory of Orthodoxy over iconoclasm, that tradition had received its definitive statement in the very formulas of the seven Ecumenical Councils and that in consequence no more was needed for full doctrinal security than to keep on repeating them. The patristic



*The Fathers of the Church. Mosaic, 11th c., St Sophia, Kiev.*

tradition seemed as rigidly fixed as the figures of the Fathers themselves in the resplendent mosaics of Byzantine churches. Holding fast to this “theology of repetition,” the Church limited itself to condemning humanists only when they went beyond all measure and tried to create a new synthesis of Hellenism and the Gospel, replacing that of the Fathers. Thus the philosopher John Italus was condemned in the eleventh century for his Platonic concepts. After that, on the Sunday of Orthodoxy (the first Sunday of Lent), anathemas were pronounced in the churches against those “who held that Plato’s ideas had real existence” and against those “who devote themselves to secular studies not merely as an intellectual exercise but actually adopting the futile opinions” of the philosophers. Yet on the other hand, a Symeon the New Theologian also had difficulties with the ecclesiastical authorities, distrustful of a mystic who changed anything of the traditional school formulas.

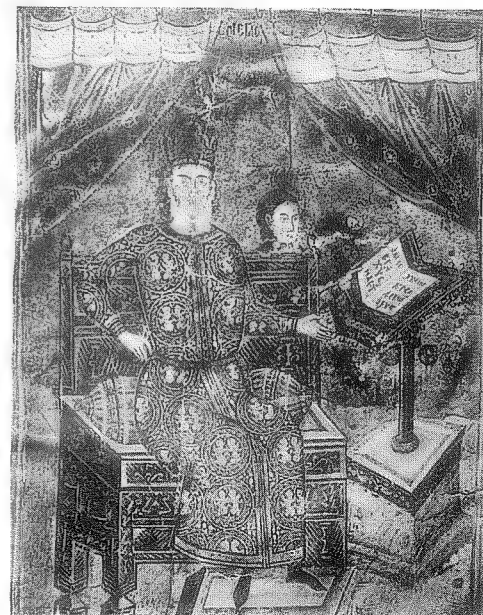
The controversy between Barlaam and Palamas, enacted against the background of this latent crisis, brought the prob-

lem baldly and boldly into the open for the first time. Its course and its issue were to decide the later history of the Eastern Church. For had that church remained passive before the advance of nominalism there is no doubt that a whole whirlwind of the new ideas of modern times would have broken down the framework of medieval society and led to a crisis like that suffered in the Christian West, *i.e.*, to Renaissance, Neopaganism, and Church Reformation in the spirit of the new nominalist philosophy.

The creative genius of Palamas, however, was attacked even after Barlaam left for Italy by a certain number of adversaries, recruited both from the humanists and from the defenders of a "theology of repetition." Perhaps this opposition would never have come out into the open after Palamas' victory of June-August, 1341 had not political circumstances favored it. We cannot here go into all the very "Byzantine" detail of an extremely complicated situation. We will limit ourselves to a brief historic outline and then give a general survey of Palamas' thought.

Akindynus, a Bulgarian monk who had been Palamas' disciple at Athos, adopted an ambiguous attitude toward the two protagonists. He wanted to play the part of arbitrator, refusing to state the problem in its full extent. In fact, he belonged to a group of "formal" conservatives who thought that the simple repetition of ancient formulas should answer any problems, and who opposed the theology of "the energies," as formulated by the monks. In August 1341, Akindynus too was condemned. As he had agreed to sign a vague formula of repentance, his name was not mentioned in the conciliar decisions. His return to the scene was caused by a struggle between two political clans.

Emperor Andronicus III Paleologus, who had presided over the June council, died four days after the debates had ended, without signing the decrees. Because his son, John V, was a minor, his wife, Anne of Savoy, became regent. The empress was not able to keep a political balance between the two



*Alexis Apocaucus. Miniature, 11th c.*

parties that formed her entourage, one headed by Patriarch John Calecas and the "Megaduke" Alexis Apocaucus, the other by the "Grand Domestic" John Cantacuzenos, who had been the right arm of Andronicus III and the real ruler of the Empire. Cantacuzenos presided over the August council that condemned Akindynus (without naming him) and published the *Synodal Tome*.

In August 1341 Cantacuzenos was overthrown by a sudden *coup d'état* of the patriarch and the megaduke. He then revolted against the court and for more than five years waged civil war against Anne's government; this war finally brought him to the imperial throne (February 1347). Palamas had openly condemned the *coup d'état* that had shattered the po-



*The Council of 1351. Miniature, 14th c.*

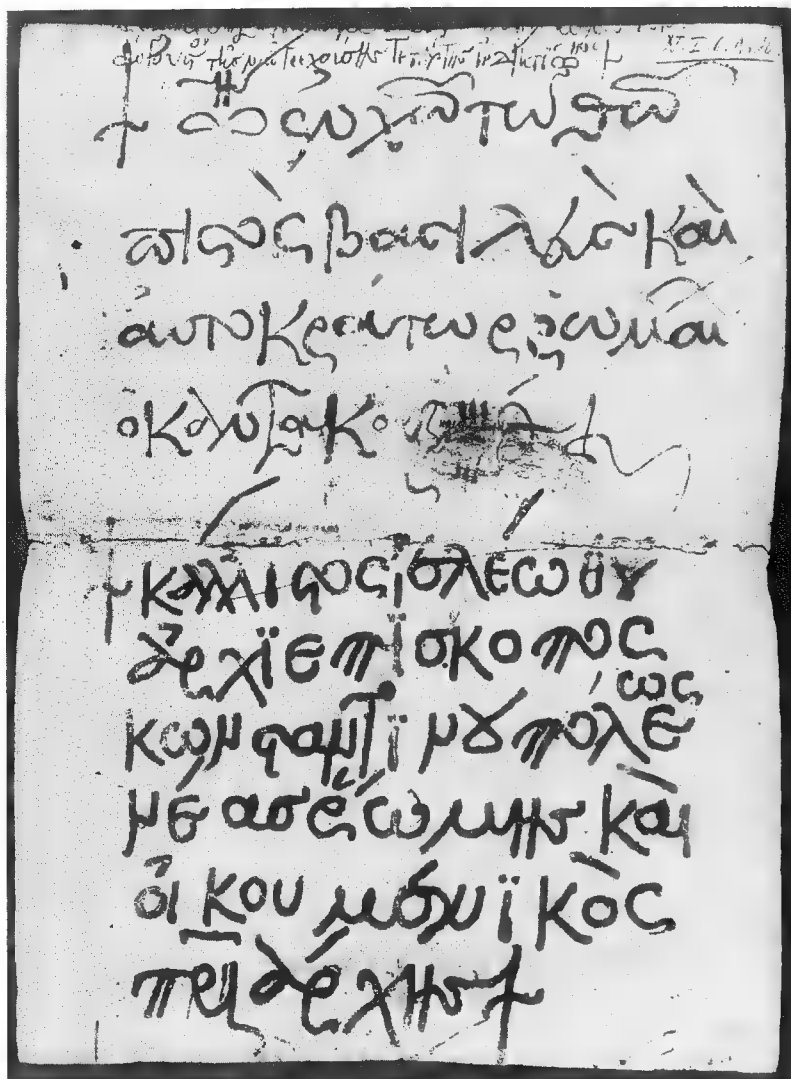


*Sunday of Orthodoxy: Reading of the anathemas.  
Miniature, 11th c.*

litical equilibrium of the Empire. He remained loyal to the Empress Anne but refused to align himself with the patriarch's politics. The latter had him arrested in the spring of 1343 for a purely political reason, but to support it, decided to charge him with heresy. At the patriarch's request, Akindynos published refutations of Palamas which the latter promptly answered.

In 1344 Calecas at the height of his power excommunicated Palamas and all his partisans and ordained Akindynos priest. Anne did not support the theological accusations hurled against Palamas, whom she feared as a political adversary but venerated as a theologian and man of the Church. In the beginning of 1347, she assembled a council which deposed the patriarch.

Cantacuzenos entered the capital the next day and presided over a series of councils favorable to Palamas. In May 1347 the



*The Decree of 1351: Original signatures of emperor and patriarch.*



*The cathedral of Palamas: St Sophia of Thessalonica, 8th c.*

hesychast doctor was consecrated archbishop of Thessalonika. The most important council met in July 1351 and condemned Palamas' last adversary, the philosopher Nicephorus Gregoras. The *Synodal Tome* published by this council constitutes the official manifesto in which the Orthodox Church sanctioned the doctrine of Palamas. During the fourteenth century these conciliar decisions were incorporated in other local councils. Their content was reproduced in the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* and from that time on included in the liturgical books.

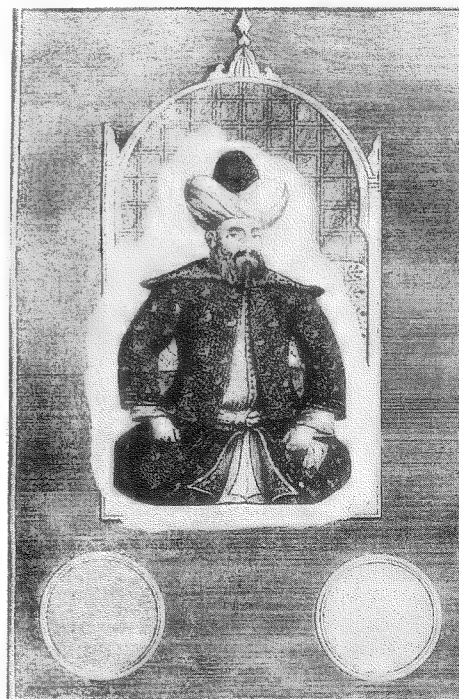
As archbishop of the great Macedonian capital, Gregory acted with remarkable pastoral zeal in most varied domains. His homilies are the best testimony to this. In the fourteenth century, Thessalonika was the scene of a real social revolution. It was jealous of a certain measure of independence it had achieved, on the model of Italian cities, by a revolt of "zealots" against the nobility. Hence it was not overenthusiastic in wel-



coming an archbishop appointed by the central power in Constantinople. Palamas was faithful to the political line he had adopted, aiming to keep the unity of the Empire in the hands of the only man capable of holding it together—Cantacuzenos. Yet he was able to win over the Thessalonians. His sermons against social injustice are often very strong, for that was the true cause of disaffection in Thessalonika. Yet in spite of the political events of his time, these sermons, remarkable for their simplicity, almost never lack theological content centered on the mystery of Christ.

The last years of Gregory were marked by an unexpected episode: during a sea voyage from Thessalonika to Byzantium, the galley on which the archbishop was travelling was captured by Turks. The passengers were forced to stay nearly a year in Asia Minor, already under Turkish occupation. Palamas' letters, and documents relevant to his captivity, are revelations in many ways. They show, for one thing, the extremely tolerant attitude of the Turks to Christians—whether in occupied territory or as

*Thessalonika today: Relics of St Gregory Palamas carried in procession.*



*Emir Orkhan.*

captives. For another they reveal the keen interest the imprisoned archbishop took in Islam, amicably disputing with the son of Emir Orkhan, even hoping that "a day will soon come when we will be able to understand each other"...In these texts one feels that this eminent representative of the Byzantine church, in spite of all his traditional fidelity to the Empire of Constantinople, clearly distinguished the special mission of the Church from the political interests of Byzantium.

Palamas died in his episcopal city on November 27, 1359. He was canonized by the Ecumenical Patriarch Philotheus, his former disciple and friend. After the city's patron, Saint Demetrius, he is still today the most venerated saint in Thessalonika.

## THE THEOLOGY OF HESYCHASM

The Byzantine monks found in Barlaam for the first time an adversary whose weapon of attack was a doctrinal system that undermined the very foundations of hesychast mysticism. They were, then, obliged to present and defend their own doctrine. That was a crucial test indeed, and its results show how deeply the fourteenth-century hesychasts were rooted in the tradition of the Greek Fathers and the early Church. In each of his works, in fact, Palamas integrates the mystical tradition, going back to Evagrius and Macarius, with Christian thought that is based on the Bible and on a vast knowledge of the Fathers. One or another manifestation of this tradition, one or another questionable practice—especially Nicephorus' *Method*—might be open to misunderstanding. But Palamas gave them a definitive interpretation in function of life in Jesus Christ, at the very heart of the ecclesiastical community. The whole history of hesychasm thus attains a full organic development intimately linking it with the tradition of the Church.

Barlaam based his position on two postulates:

1. The Aristotelian postulate that all knowledge, including knowledge of God, is derived from perception of sense "experience."

2. A Neoplatonic postulate, based also on Christian writers, especially the Pseudo-Dionysius, according to which God is beyond sense experience and therefore unknowable. Barlaam held that all knowledge of God must be indirect, passing always "through beings" perceptible to sense. Therefore mystical knowledge itself can have only a "symbolic" reality.

The whole controversy centered on these Barlaamite postulates derived from Greek philosophy.

Palamas allowed a certain value to ancient philosophy, but only on the natural level. He could not accept, however, the naturalism of Barlaam's thought, which really denied the pos-

sibility of direct intervention of the Spirit in man's knowledge of God. He wrote:

*I hold that among God's gifts some are natural; they are granted indiscriminately to all, before the law, under the law, and after the law. Others are supernatural and full of mystery. These latter gifts I hold to be higher than the former, as those who have been judged worthy to receive the Wisdom of the Spirit are superior to the whole tribe of Hellenists. I hold also that philosophy is one of the natural gifts of God, as are also the discoveries of human reason, the sciences...I give each the honor it merits...(Triads II, 1 § 25, pp. 275-277).*

Hence Palamas refused to give any credence to what the ancient philosophers said of the knowledge of God. He developed a realistic doctrine of supernatural knowledge, independent of any sense experience but granted in Jesus Christ to man as a whole—body and soul—admitting him even here below to the first fruits of final deification and the vision of God, not by his own powers but by the grace of God. The hesychast doctor justifies the psycho-physical method of prayer in this context, rejecting the Platonic spiritualism of Barlaamite anthropology for the Biblical concept of man; the body is far from being a prison of the soul, for the body itself receives the grace of the sacraments and the pledge of final resurrection. Why then would it not have a share in "pure prayer"?

We will limit ourselves here to illustrating these crucial points made by Palamas with a few texts from his *Triads for the Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, which has only recently been published and translated for the first time. Gregory always begins by criticizing Hellenic philosophy in general:

*Certain men speak contemptuously of the end proposed to Christians under the pretext that it is too lowly: those unutterably good things that are promised to us in the world to come! They accept nothing but knowledge of "experience," and would bring it into the Church that lives by Christ's own*

wisdom. Those who possess no scientific knowledge, they assert, are ignorant and imperfect; all must devote themselves wholly to Hellenic studies, forsaking the teachings of the Gospel (for those teachings are of no use in dispelling ignorance of science), and mockingly abandon him who says "Become perfect" (1 Cor 14:20; cf. Matt 5:48), "If a man is in Christ, he is a perfect man" (Phil 3:14-15; Col 1:28) and "We preach to the perfect" (1 Cor 2:6)...It is not by dispelling that kind of ignorance but by dispelling your ignorance of God and divine doctrine, ignorance which our theologians condemn, by making your whole life better in conformity to the rules laid down by these theologians, that you will be filled with the wisdom of God and will become in reality the image and likeness of God (Triads I, 1, § 4, p. 15).

But does not Palamas' reasoning contain a fallacy? Following Saint Paul, he proclaims the superiority of grace over nature, very much in the same way as the great Western doctor of grace, St. Augustine, but he also defends the psychophysical method of prayer taught by Nicephorus the Hesychast. Even today this method seems too like a kind of Christian yoga, automatically causing contact with God, making grace depend on a technique that is natural, gross, and, in any case, purely human.

But Barlaam's criticism of hesychast prayer is in reality based on a spiritualistic presupposition (and the same is true of many modern critics), a presupposition that identifies the supernatural with the immaterial. Even to think of the human body as a possible receptacle for grace seemed an intolerable outrage to the Calabrian philosopher. But for Palamas, on the contrary, as for the whole monastic tradition derived from the writings of the Pseudo-Macarius, it has been a self-evident fact since the moment when the Son of God Himself took flesh in the womb of Mary and established a visible Church upon earth, whose sacramental grace can and must sanctify the





*The Eucharist. Enamel, 10th c.*

whole man, as a pledge of bodily resurrection on the last day. The whole controversy between Barlaam and Palamas turns chiefly on this point: the opposition between Scripture and Hellenism, Jerusalem and Athens, the apostles and the philosophers, the religion of the Incarnation and of bodily resurrection and the religion of disembodiment and of immortality of the soul.

We will quote here some texts on the concept of the "return to self" that is the basis of the hesychast method, interpreted by the monks in a corporeal as well as a spiritual sense.

*In his incomparable love for men, the Son of God did not merely unite his divine Hypostasis to our nature, clothing himself with a living body and an intelligent soul, "to appear on earth and live with men" (Baruch 3:38), but, O incomparable and magnificent miracle! he unites himself also to human hypostases, joining himself to each of the faithful by communion in his holy Body. For he becomes one body with us (Eph 3:6) making us a temple of the whole Godhead—for in the very Body of Christ "the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells corporeally" (Col 3:9). How then would he not illuminate those who share worthily in the divine radiance of his Body within us, shining upon their soul as he once shone on the bodies of the apostles on Tabor? For as this Body, the source of the light of grace, was at that time not yet united to our body, it shone exteriorly on those who came near it worthily, transmitting light to the soul through the eyes of sense. But today, since it is united to us and dwells within us, it illumines the soul interiorly (Triads I, 3 § 38, p. 193).*

This passage reveals very clearly the anthropological and theological structure into which Palamas inserted hesychast spirituality. Since the Incarnation, our bodies have become "temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us" (1 Cor 6:19); it is there, within our own bodies, that we must seek the Spirit, within our bodies sanctified by the sacraments and engrafted by the eucharist into the Body of Christ. God is now to be found within; He is no longer exterior to us. Therefore, we find the light of Mount Tabor within ourselves. The apostles had only an exterior vision, for Christ had not yet died and risen from the dead, but today we are, all of us, in living reality members of His Body, the Church.

The Christian mystical "return to self" thus has an entirely different meaning from the Socratic "Know thyself."

*If you follow out this precept (of the philosophers) to its end, you will find yourself engulfed in impiety. For they teach metempsychosis: hence they believe self-knowledge according to the Socratic precept to be impossible unless we know the*



body of our previous incarnation, the places lived in, all that had been done and learned there...Their "Know thyself" leads those who cannot see through the trick into this folly—and they say all this agrees with the teaching of the Fathers! (Triads I, 1 § 10, p. 33).

In answer to the Calabrian's criticism, the hesychast doctor puts this question: *We who carry as in vessels of clay, that is, in our bodies, the light of the Father, in the person of Jesus Christ, in which we know the glory of the Holy Spirit—how can it dishonor our mind to dwell in the inner sanctuary of the body?* (Triads I, 2 § 2, p. 79).

He answers: *When spiritual joy comes to the body from the mind, it suffers no diminution by this communion with the body, but rather transfigures the body, spiritualizing it. For then, rejecting all evil desires of the flesh, it no longer weighs down the soul that rises up with it, the whole man becoming spirit, as it is written: "He who is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6, 8) (Triads II, 2 § 9, p. 336-338).*

Thus Palamas' thought re-established the dignity of matter, which Hellenistic spiritualism always tended to deny. He rediscovered the true meaning of New Testament terms such as spirit (*pneuma*), soul (*psyche*), body (*soma*), and flesh (*sarx*), which do not oppose spirit to matter but the supernatural to the created world. The human spirit is, in fact, as radically different from God as is the body, and God in granting his grace saves the whole man, his body and his soul. Palamas brings the authority of Scripture against the nihilistic mysticism that Barlaam's Hellenized mind was able to accept:

*Our passionate life must be offered to God, living and active, so that it may be a living sacrifice. The apostle even said the same of the body: "I exhort you," he says, in fact, "by the mercy of God, to offer your body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom 12:1). How can our living body be of-*

*fered as a sacrifice pleasing to God? When our glance is meek...when we draw down and pass to others the mercy from on high, when our ears are attentive to the divine teaching, not only to understand, but, as David says, "to remember God's commandments in order to carry them out" (Ps 102:18)...when our tongue, our hands and our feet, all serve the divine will. Is not this observance of God's commandments an activity common to soul and body? How then could it be true that all activities common to soul and body darken and blind the soul (as Barlaam says)? (Triads II, 2 § 20, pp.364-365).*

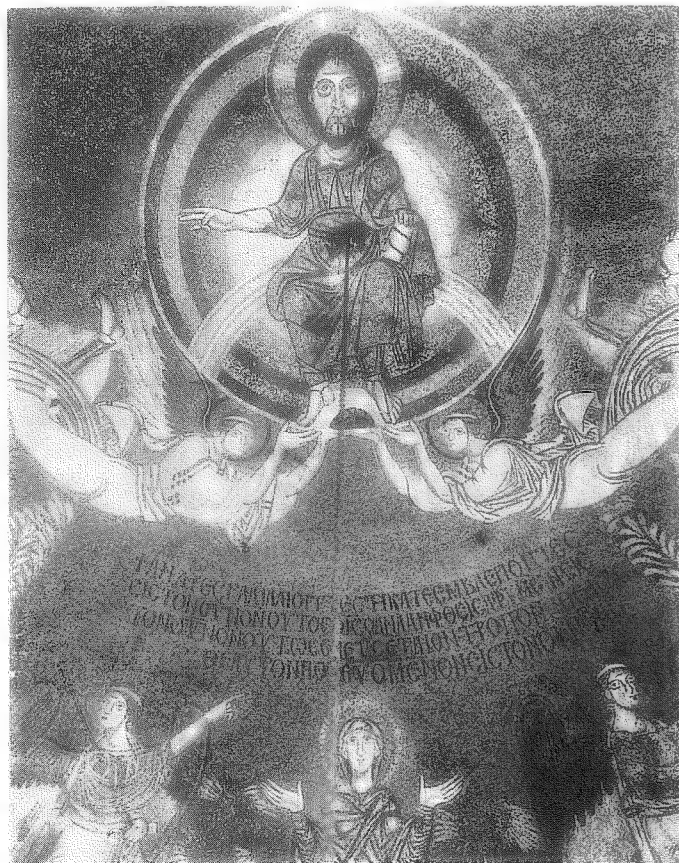
Here we see the gulf that separates hesychast mysticism from Hindu *nirvana*. The Christian mystic seeks a new life in Christ, an active life for his whole being, and he knows that the grace of baptism and the eucharist have already given him that life; moreover he seeks it in the interior of his own being. That is why the hesychast movement of the fourteenth century never deteriorated into individualistic and subjective mysticism but led in fact to a revival of ecclesiastical sacramentalism. Palamas himself says of baptism and the eucharist that in these two sacraments our whole salvation is found, for they sum up the dispensation of the God-Man (*Homily* 60, ed. Oikonomos, p. 258). In his sermons at Thessalonika, Palamas earnestly preached obedience to church laws on the Sunday liturgy, for the man who despises Sunday Mass is far from God (*Homily* 50); he also advises what would seem to be daily communion (*Homily* 38).

As an inevitable consequence of his Christocentric anthropology and mysticism, Palamas became the advocate of a concept of history that again led him to oppose pagan Hellenism and renew the spirit of Holy Scripture. He would seem to have been inspired by the famous ninth-century mosaic that rose above him in Thessalonika's Cathedral of Santa Sophia when he preached there: the Christ has ascended to heaven, but an inscription recalls the angel's word to the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stay here looking up to heaven? This

same Jesus who has been taken from you will come in the same way you have seen him going to heaven" (Acts 1:11). The Christ of the Ascension is also the Christ of the Second Coming. A spiritual way founded on *two historic facts*—a past fact, the Incarnation of the Word; a fact still in the future, the

*"The same Jesus will come..."*

*Mosaic, 8th c., St Sophia, Thessalonika.*



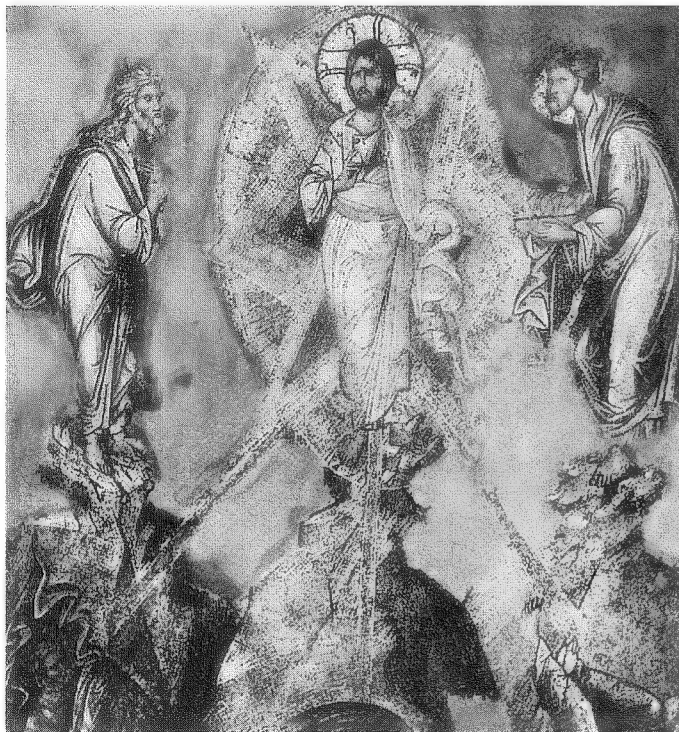
bodily resurrection of the last day—can never ignore history as did Greek antiquity. As O. Cullmann says, the Greeks conceived happiness "spatially," defining it "by a below and an above"; but in the Bible it is always conditioned by "present" and "future" (*Christ and Time*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1950, pp. 52-53). The Christian, in fact, does not seek to be free of the body; he knows the end and meaning of history. He possesses in himself the sacramental pledge of the Kingdom to come and his whole life consists precisely in achieving the fullest possible realization of this pledge, to manifest even here below the happiness promised to the elect.

This eschatological perspective of Palamite thought must be realized in order to understand his theology and the images he uses to express it. Take for example the term "Taborite light," with which hesychasts always describe their experience of God. For they identify the divine reality that reveals itself to the saints with the light that appeared to the Lord's disciples at His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. Such an identification seems to them justified not merely as a symbol but as something very real. Patristic tradition in fact unanimously interprets the Gospel story of the Transfiguration as an foretaste of the Second Coming. But this Second Coming is already a living reality for the Christian in his sacramental life and spiritual experience: the Kingdom to come is already "within us," until the full manifestation of its glory on the last day. Is not this eschatology of "fulfillment" the essential theme of ecclesiology and New Testament spirituality? Palamas upheld "supra-rational knowledge" against the rationalism of the Calabrian philosopher.

*This supra-rational knowledge, he wrote, is the common possession of all those who have believed in Christ...Christ will come in the glory of the Father and...in that glory "the just shall shine as the sun" (Matt 13:43); they will be light and they will see light, a blessed and sacred vision, that is the portion of the purified heart alone. Today this light shines out in part, a*

*pledge given those who by impassibility have left behind all that is forbidden, and by pure and immaterial prayer have passed beyond all that is pure. But on that day the splendor of this light will deify "the sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36) who will rejoice in eternity and glory in communion with the One who has given our nature divine glory and radiance (Triads, II, 3 § 66, p. 525).*

*The Transfiguration. Mosaic, 14th c.,  
Church of the Holy Apostles, Thessalonica.*



As Palamas wrote in a passage quoted above, the difference between the apostles who went up Mount Tabor with Jesus and the Christians of today lies in the fact that Peter, James and John saw the light "exteriorly," as an object appearing supernaturally to their bodily eyes, while Christians now, sacramentally united to the Redeemer after His death and resurrection, can contemplate the light interiorly, within their own

*Modern fresco. Monastery of St Panteleimon, Mount Athos.*



hearts. They can develop the potentialities of this gift and its divine character ever more and more until they find God Himself. That is the special goal sought by monks, and therefore they are the prophets of the New Covenant.

This prophetic character of monasticism makes it responsible in a unique way, not only for the salvation of the individual monk, but for the whole Church. Without taking the place of the hierarchical *magisterium* that is the guardian of the tradition and the sacramental structure of the Church, the monks have their own part to play, expressing revealed truth in the measure in which truth and sanctity are one. This concept of the ecclesiastical function of monasticism and its prophetic role in the history of salvation drew Palamas from his Athonite retreat, plunged him into dogmatic controversies, and led him to take an active share in the political and social life of his time.



*Pentecost. Mosaic, 11th c., Church of St Luke in Phocis.*

### A CHRISTIAN EXISTENTIALISM

In its opposition to Barlaamite nominalism, Palamite thought is a solemn affirmation of divine immanence in history and in man. God does not reveal Himself to the world only "through creatures" but directly, in Jesus Christ.

*We have all, all of us, known the Son by the Father's voice speaking to us from on high (Matt 3:16-17) and the Holy Spirit himself, who is unutterable light, has shown us that this is indeed the well-beloved of the Father; the Son himself has manifested to us the name of his Father and as he ascended again into heaven promised to send us the Holy Spirit to abide with us forever (John 14:16); the Holy Spirit himself has come down to us and abides with us, teaching us all truth (John 14:13). How then could it be true that we know God only through creatures? Is it impossible for one who does not know marriage by personal experience to understand the intimate union of God with the Church, since he has no analogy of his*



own experience to appeal to? Will you then advise everyone to renounce virginity in order to achieve the knowledge of God of which you speak? But Paul refutes you; he, though unmarried, was the first to proclaim: "This is a great mystery, but I speak of Christ and the Church" (Triads II, 3 § 67, p. 529).

God reveals himself "face to face, and not in enigmas" (Num 12:8); he unites himself to those who are worthy as to his own members, as soul is united to body; he unites himself coming to dwell in his wholeness in the whole of their being, so that they in turn may dwell in him; through the Son, the Spirit is poured out abundantly upon us (Titus 3:6), and yet it is not, because of that, a created spirit (Triads I, 11 § 29, pp. 611-613).

Palamas affirms the utter reality of the saints' vision of God, constantly repeating that the grace that reveals God, like the light that illumined the disciples on Mount Tabor, is *uncreated*. In Palamite terminology, as in that of the Greek Fathers, God is essentially apart from other beings by His uncreated nature. The proper condition of these beings is the created state, and when they transcend their own domain by communication with God, they participate in uncreated life. Eastern theology has in fact never had recourse to the idea of a "created supernature"; what the Christian seeks, what God grants him in sacramental grace, is uncreated divine life, deification. Knowledge of God, then, according to Palamas, is not a knowledge that necessarily demands that the knowing subject be exterior to the object known, but a union in uncreated light. Man, in fact, possesses no faculty capable of seeing God, and if such vision exists, it must be because in His omnipotence God Himself united Himself to man, communicating to him the knowledge he has of Himself. Speaking of the supernatural power to see God given us by the presence of the Spirit, Palamas writes:

*Since this power has no other means of acting, having gone beyond all other beings, it becomes wholly light in itself and like that which it sees; it is united without admixture, being light (itself), and seeing light through light. If it looks at it-*



Moses sees the burning bush. Miniature, 12th c.

*self, it sees light; if it looks at the object of its vision, it again sees light, and if it looks at the means by which it sees, again it sees light. That is what union means; all is so one, that he who sees can make no distinction either of the means or the end or the object; he is conscious only of being light and seeing light distinct from all that is created (Triads II, 3 § 36, pp.459-461).*

Such passages in the hesychast doctor essentially express the Scriptural concept that, in Christ, man is given the power to "become Spirit" (John 3:6).

By participation in God Himself, in His uncreated grace man himself becomes God. As Saint Paul says, "he lives no more, but Christ lives in him."

By asserting the full reality of deification, however, Palamas was accused of "Messalianism" by Barlaam. One of the heretical teachings of the "Messalians" or "Bogomils" condemned by the Byzantine church was the heretics' claim to "see the divine essence with their bodily eyes." In answer, Palamas had recourse to the distinction between the divine essence and its energies, a distinction whose essential elements had already been stated by Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor.

For "to see God face to face" did not mean to Palamas "to see the divine Essence." The "superessential" God can in no way be identified with any created concept, above all not with the philosophical concept of essence. *When God conversed with Moses, he did not say "I am the essence" but "I am He who is" (Exodus 3:14). For He who is does not come from the essence, but essence comes from Him who is, for He who is embraces the totality of Being in Himself (Triads III, 2 § 12, p. 665).*

The God of Christians, the God of the Scriptures, is a living God, but He is also essentially transcendent to every creature. Even when He manifests Himself, He remains unknowable in His essence, for a revelation of the divine essence would bring God down to the level of creatures and make man a "God by nature." All revelation, all participation, all deification is, then, a

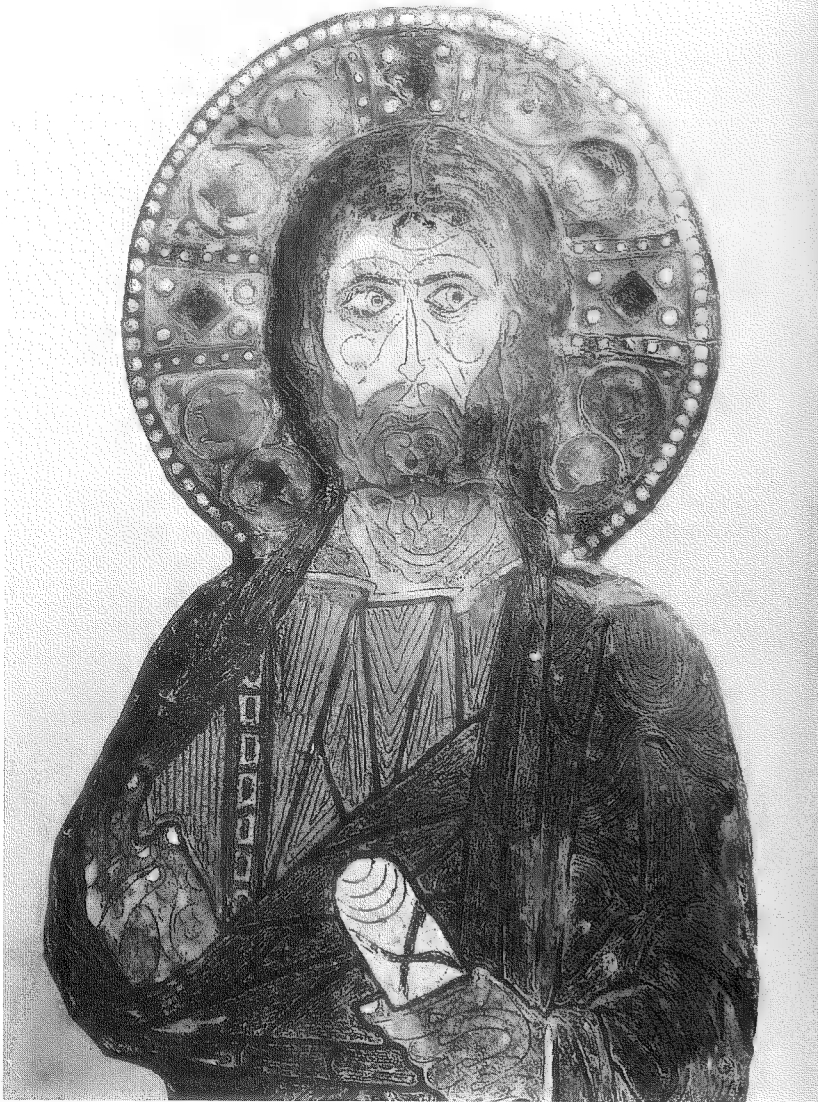
free act of the living God, a divine energy. But God Himself does not totally identify Himself with that act; He remains above it, even while manifesting Himself wholly in it. for in fact God *possesses* the creature and communicates to it His own life, but the creature cannot *possess* God, who always remains the *only One who acts*. Yet to know the divine essence would be to possess God. The aim of Palamas' theology is to reconcile two apparently contradictory facts, both integral to patristic tradition.

1. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is a total revelation that establishes an intimacy and union between God and man, expressed by Saint Paul in the image of one Body, that gives man a vision of God "face to face."

2. God is by nature unknowable.

It is obvious that these two truths cannot be reconciled in the framework of an essentialist philosophy. Palamas therefore takes as his starting point the divine *existence* made accessible in the Christian experience. He establishes a distinction in fact between the divine act of revelation—the energy—and the unknowable essence. This distinction, he holds, does not break the unity of the divine being since God in His simplicity is wholly present in the essence and in the energy. We cannot develop here this key point of Palamite theology but wish to emphasize that the formulation of his thought takes this form because it does not spring from abstract speculation but is a way of expressing, with utmost realism—against the nominalism of Byzantine humanists—the mystery of deification. Here is a text that has special significance in this regard:

*Since one can participate in God and since the superessential essence of God is absolutely above participation, there exists something between the essence that cannot be participated and those who participate, to make participation in God possible for them. If you eliminate that which exists between the participators and that which cannot be participated—O what emptiness!—you cut us off from God, destroying the link, cre-*



*The Living God. Enamel, 13th c.*

ating a vast, unbridgeable abyss between God on one side and the creation and government of creatures on the other. We would then have to look for another God who not only possesses in Himself His own end, His own energy and His own deification, but who would also be a good God—for then He would not wish to exist only to contemplate Himself—a God who is not only perfect, but surpassing all fullness of being, so that when in His goodness He wishes to do good, He can do so...Thus, He makes Himself present to all things by His manifestations and by His creative and providential energies. In one word, we must seek a God in whom we can participate in one way or another, so that by participating, each of us, in the manner proper to each and by the analogy of participation, may receive being, life and deification (*Triads* III, 2 § 24, p. 687).

The unknowable God of Barlaam, in fact, can have no true existence, and, in any case, why would Christ have come if God is always to remain beyond the reach of man?

To the philosophical objection that he was introducing a “second” and “lower” God beside the unique Godhead, Palamas replied over and over again that no multiplicity of divine manifestations could affect the unity of God, for God is beyond the categories of whole and parts and, while in His essence always remaining unknowable, reveals Himself wholly in each energy as the Living God.

*Goodness is not one part of God, Wisdom another, and Majesty or Providence still another; God is wholly Goodness, wholly Wisdom, wholly Providence and wholly Majesty; for He is one, without any division into parts, but, possessing in Himself each of these energies, He reveals Himself wholly in each by His presence and His action in a unified, simple and undivided fashion (Dialogue of an Orthodox and a Barlaamite, Palamas, Writings, II, Thessaloniki, 1966, p. 209).*

Thus Palamite theology creates a dogmatic synthesis of the hesychast tradition, affirming both the exclusively Christocentric and sacramental foundations of "deification" and the absolutely unattainable nature of the divine essence. These two aspects of Christian thought are, of course, the basic axioms of Greek patristics. Palamas' only claim to originality lies in the clarity with which he states and solves the problem. What is an insoluble and absurd dilemma for rationalistic thought becomes in his words a fully satisfying statement of the divine Mystery. God is at the same time the unattainable Essence—because He alone is the Creator, He alone the Uncreated, revealing Himself only where and in the measure He Himself desires—but He is also the Living God who does actually desire to reveal Himself fully to man in His Son and to share with man His own uncreated existence.

Palamas' adversaries accused him of introducing duality in God: if the energy is distinct from the essence, are there not two Gods? Palamas and his followers always answer this objection by affirming that, in virtue of the simplicity of His being, God is wholly and entirely present both in His essence and in His energies. Thus they solved the problem of the link needed between the divine absolute and the world in an authentically Christian manner. Plato had conceived this link—this *metaxu*—to be the world of ideas, a self-existent reality of which the visible world is only a reflection. Fundamentally irreconcilable with the Biblical concept of creation *ex nihilo*, Platonism had been the greatest temptation for Eastern Christian thought from the time of Origen. Its final defeat came only with Palamas, who rejects any autonomous reality existing between God and creatures; *God Himself*, in His free condescension, is that reality. As Saint Maximus says, He "multiplies Himself" to make Himself accessible to the multitude of beings. The divine energies therefore are not "things," differing from one supreme "thing" that is God's essence. Grace—creative, redemptive or sanctifying—is not some-

thing with which God rewards creatures, but a manifestation of the existence of the living God.

Thus the opposition between Palamas and his adversaries grew from their essentialist philosophy, that could not admit the reality of the God of Scripture, both transcendent and living. Against this essentialism the hesychast doctor taught a personal existentialism, applying the concept of divine "simplicity" not to the essence but to the personal Divine Being which is revealed both in essence and in the free acts—or energies—of God. The originality of the Palamite response to the essentialist concept of God does not consist in adding another element—the energies—to the Divine Being, but in thinking of God Himself in existential terms, while holding to His absolute transcendence.

Palamas' thought is very clear when he speaks of God as subject of action. He is closer to reality than when he tries, more or less successfully, to conceptualize his thought in philosophical terms which inevitably lead to thinking of God as an object of knowledge. Even the distinction between the essence and the energies does not impose itself on God; it is God Himself in His omnipotence and free condescension who imposes on Himself a really diversified mode of existence.

*God*, writes Palamas, *in His overflowing goodness to us, being transcendent to all things, incomprehensible and ineffable, consents to allow our intelligence to participate in Him and becomes invisibly visible in His superessential and inseparable power* (Triads I, 3 § 10, p. 129).

We will quote, in conclusion, a Christmas sermon of the greatest nineteenth-century Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow. Its terms are like those of the hesychast doctor, witnessing to remarkable theological continuity in the heart of the Eastern Church: *God rejoices from all eternity in the sublimity of His glory. . . glory is the revelation, the manifestation, the reflection, the garment of interior perfec-*



*tion. God revealed Himself to Himself from all eternity in the eternal generation of His consubstantial Son and by the eternal procession of His consubstantial Spirit, and thus the unity in the holy Trinity shone with an essential, imperishable, unchanging glory. God the Father is the "Father of Glory" (Eph 1:17); the son of God is the "brightness of his glory" (Heb 1:3) and "possessed the glory of the Father before the world was" (Jn 17:5); so too the Spirit of God is the "Spirit of glory" (1 Pet 4:14). God lives in this glory that is His own, intrinsic to Him, in perfect happiness above all glory, needing no witness, unable to allow any division. But as in His mercy and His infinite love He desires to share His beatitude and make happy those who participate in His glory, He calls forth His infinite perfections and reveals them in His creatures; His glory is resplendent in the heavenly powers, reflected in man, clothing the visible world with a garment of magnificence; He gives His glory to those whom He allows to participate in it and receive it; it then returns again to Him. This eternal circulation of the divine glory, as it were, constitutes the blessed life, the happiness of creatures...*

*From the moment the divinity existed in humanity, all the gifts of His divine power that belong to life and to piety were communicated to us (2 Pet 1:3) and that is why our weakness will be filled with divine strength, our lies cleansed by divine truth, our darkness illumined by divine light...*

*That is the glorious mystery and mysterious glory of this day! The heavenly servants of light saw the dawn of glory before we did, and at once they alerted us, crying out: "Glory to God in the highest of heavens!" Now it is no longer dawn but high noon of that glory: may our glory also dawn, may it in turn ascend to those who dwell in heaven (Choix de Sermons et Discours de S. Em. Mgr. Philarète, tr. from Russian by A. Serpinet, I, Paris, 1886, pp. 3-4, 8-9).*



*"Divinity existed in humanity." Mosaic, 11th c., Daphni.*



*Russian Monks. Miniature, 15th c.*

## Hesychasm After Palamas

### IN THE CHRISTIAN EAST FROM THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY TO TODAY

Gregory of Palamas was not the only master of mysticism in fourteenth-century Byzantium. Beside him stands the attractive personality of Gregory of Sinai. We have already spoken of that austere teacher, who took no part in the doctrinal controversies with Barlaam and his ilk, but, by dwelling in Bulgaria, did much to spread hesychast mysticism in Slavic-speaking lands. His influence was in fact greater than that of Palamas in the sphere of spiritual life. His opuscles on prayer provide as a whole a detailed Rule for hesychasm. Their innumerable precepts are based on minute observation of psychological states experienced by monks, with additional prescriptions for "pure prayer" and the psycho-physical method of Nicephorus. Gregory of Sinai's writings systematize the whole hesychast tradition, including the speculative and intellectualist mysticism of Evagrius, the prophetic spirit of Symeon the New Theologian and the spiritual doctrine of the heart that goes back to Macarius. This organization of hesychast spirituality by Gregory of Sinai made the Palamite theological synthesis both easier and more necessary.

We do not know what relations may have existed between Gregory of Sinai and Palamas, although both lived on Athos at the same time. This silence may perhaps lead us to surmise that there was at first a certain rivalry between the two movements they represented.

In any case, the differences, if real, between the two masters, had no influence on their disciples; Mark, Isidore, Callistus and others who were closest to the Sinaite were also the most zealous

in Constantinople for Palamite theology. Moreover, Gregory's Bulgarian disciples had the decrees of the Council of Constantinople in 1351 confirmed by the patriarchate of Trnovo. Thus the theological structure elaborated by Palamas and confirmed by the Church was adopted by the whole hesychast tradition.

In all the wide-spread strata of Byzantine monasticism, "pure prayer" was identified exclusively with the "prayer of Jesus" and the mysticism of the Name. The method of Nicephorus, although very popular, played only a subordinate role, and, while hesychast spirituality penetrated the liturgical rules of monastic communities to enlarge and enrich them, it did not tend to replace them. Apropos of this, we will quote here a text that was later to be very widely known: the *Century of Callistus* and of Ignatius Xanthopoulos, two Athonite monks of the second half of the fourteenth century.

*The beginning of every action pleasing to God is calling with faith on the life-saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, as He Himself said: "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5), together with the peace and love which accompany this calling. Peace, for as the Apostle says: "I will therefore that men pray...without wrath and doubting" (1 Tim. 2:8); love, for "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 Jn 4:16). These two, peace and love, not only make prayer propitious, but are themselves reborn and shine forth from this prayer, like inseparable Divine rays increasing and coming to perfection (Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart, tr. by E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, London, Faber and Faber, 1951, pp. 80-81).*

*At this point it seems to us suitable to expound a certain natural method of the blessed Nicephorus of entering the heart by attention through breathing, which contributes to the concentration of thoughts (Ibid., pp. 169-170).*

*The first, or rather the greatest and most important, thing on which the success of this mental doing depends is the help*

*of the Divine grace, together with a heart-felt, pure and undistracted calling to our Lord Jesus Christ; and it can in no way be achieved solely by this natural method of descent into the heart by way of breathing, or by seclusion in a quiet and dimly lit place. This can never be! (Ibid., p. 192).*

*For the only reason why this method was invented by the holy fathers was to help to collect thoughts, and to bring the mind from its usual dispersed flitting back to itself and to concentrate its attention... (Ibid., p. 195).*

*...You should know, brother, that every means or method, every rule and, if you like, all these various practices are established and legalized because we cannot as yet pray purely and without distraction. Therefore when through the benevolence and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ this comes to pass in us, then, abandoning the many and the varied, we shall arise with the One, the Single and the Unifying, directly in a union which transcends reason... (Ibid., pp. 211-212).*

The victory of Palamism was equally important for Byzantine theology. It freed it from the "conservatism of repetition" and launched it definitely on the way of scriptural and sacramental realism, the way of the Eastern tradition threatened by the wave of nominalistic humanism. The personality of Nicholas Cabasilas is a striking example of this.

Under the aegis of Emperor John Cantacuzenos (1347-1354), Cabasilas had begun his career as a humanist and a diplomat. Like Cantacuzenos and Demetrius Cydones, he belonged to a group of *literati* passionately devoted to Greek antiquity. Everything seemed destined to identify him with the other adversaries of Palamism. Cydones had yielded to this temptation, for he believed Western Scholasticism had preserved Greek philosophy more successfully than had the Athonite hermitages. He became an enthusiastic Thomist, translated the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas into Byzantine Greek and died a member of the Roman Church. Cabasilas



*John Cantacuzenos, emperor and monk. Miniature, 14th c.*

hesitated a long time before choosing his own path. But in the end he came to see the true orthodoxy of Palamism and to teach a sacramental and ecclesial mysticism, the very essence of all Palamas had defended. To the end Nicholas was a faithful friend of John Cantacuzenos, who became a monk after his abdication in 1354, devoting himself to theology and writing several books against the adversaries of Palamism.

Cabasilas only occasionally took part in actual theological controversy. This might seem to indicate a lack of interest in the problem's dogmatic aspect as such. But, as we mentioned above, Palamas himself sought only one thing—to express in theological formulas the reality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Nicholas Cabasilas' *Life in Christ* is therefore really a solemn Palamite manifesto, all the more because the whole humanistic movement of the Renaissance was at that very time claiming man's whole life to be in man himself! We have seen that Palamas taught that the sacraments, particularly baptism and the eucharist, were the foundation of hesychast spirituality. Cabasilas follows him in this very point. His *Life in Christ* consists of a detailed explanation of the three sacraments of incorporation in the Church: Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist.

*Through the sacred Mysteries, as through windows, the Son of righteousness enters into this dark world. He puts to death the life which corresponds to this world, but raises up that which is above this world..., by introducing the abiding and immortal life into a mortal body (I: 6; tr. C. deCatanzaro, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974).*

Like Palamas, Cabasilas defends the concept of mystical knowledge of God and like him also sees this knowledge as a fruit of baptism. Thus he quotes a passage of John Chrysostom: *From the moment we are baptized, the soul, being cleansed by the Spirit, shines more brightly than the sun. Nor do we only contemplate God's glory, we also receive this brightness. It is as when pure silver is exposed to the sun's beams, it itself be-*





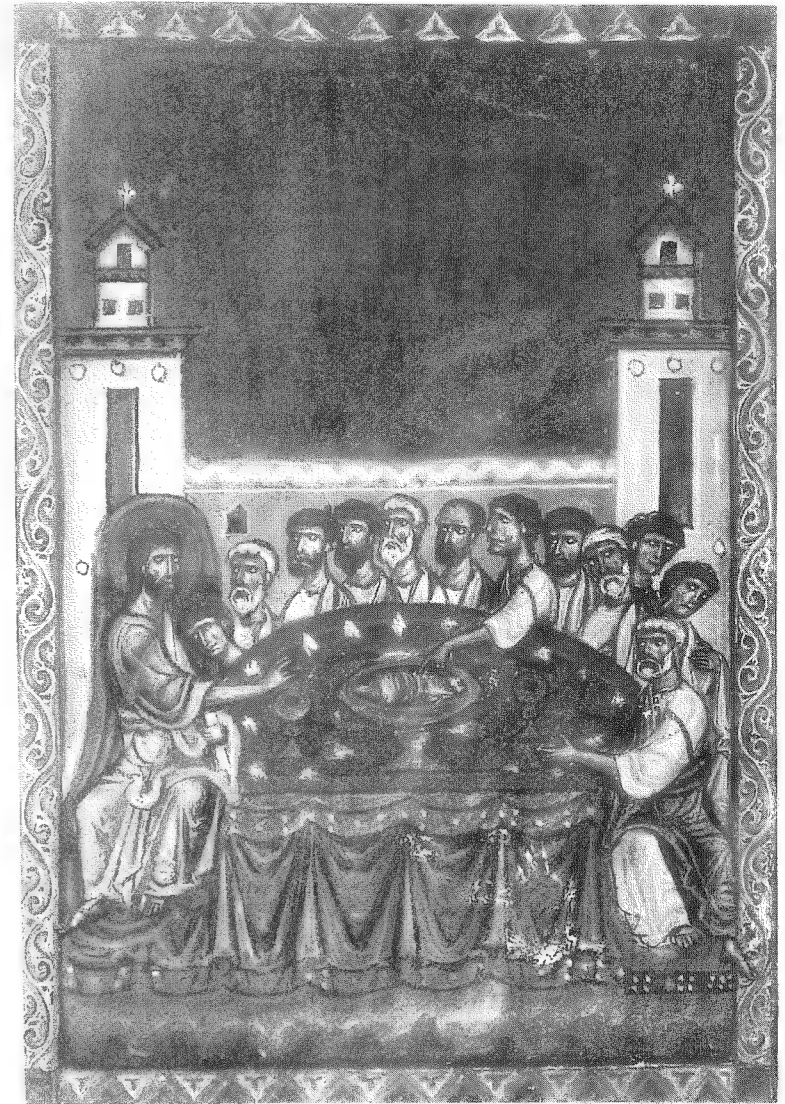
*Baptism. Miniature, 14th c.*

*comes shining, not merely because of its own nature, but due to the brightness of the sun* (II: 20, tr. C. deCatanzaro).

*This is the effect of Baptism—to set free from sins, to reconcile God to man, to make man one with God, to open the eyes for souls to perceive the divine ray—to sum it up, to prepare for the life to come* (II: 22, tr. C. deCatanzaro).

After speaking of the sacrament of chrism that seals baptismal incorporation in the Orthodox ritual, Cabasilas describes the eucharist, the true worship “in spirit and in truth.” His conclusion returns to the two poles of fourteenth-century hesychast spirituality: the ceaseless prayer of the Name of Jesus and “continuous” communion.

*At every hour invoke him, him who is the object of our meditations, so that our mind may always be absorbed in him and our attention concentrated each day on him... Invoke the name of God with your lips and also with desire and with thought so that the only saving remedy may be applied to all by which we have sinned, for there is no other name by which we are saved* (Acts 4:12) (VI:12).



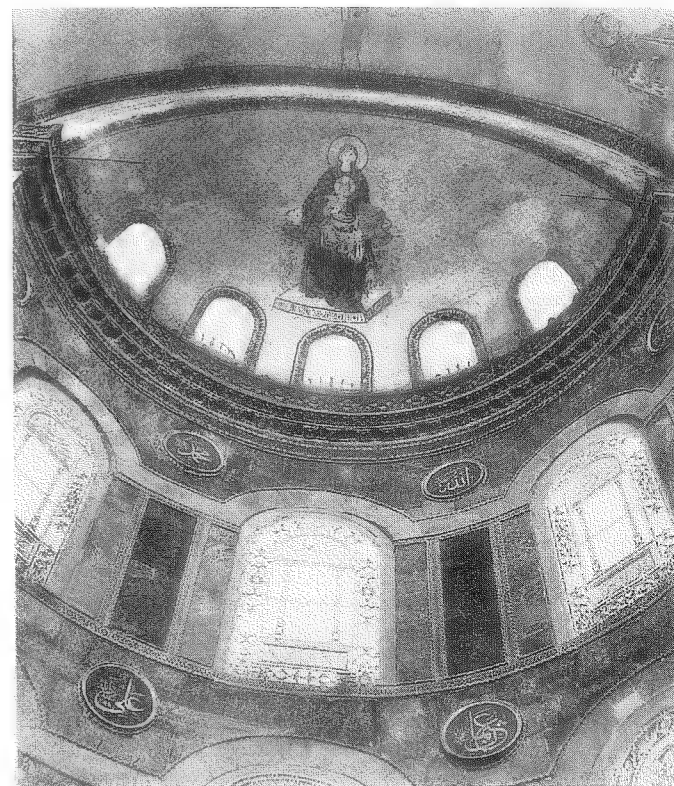
*The bread of Life. Miniature, 13th c.*

*The Bread which truly strengthens the heart of man will obtain this for us; it will enkindle in us ardor for contemplation, destroying the torpor that weighs down our soul; it is the Bread that has come down from heaven to bring Life; it is the Bread that we must seek in every way. We must be continually occupied with this Eucharistic banquet lest we suffer famine. We must guard against allowing our soul to grow anemic and sickly, keeping away from this food under the pretext of reverence for the sacrament. On the contrary, after telling our sins to the priest, we must drink of the expiating Blood (VI:14).*

We must observe that, like most of the Fathers, Cabasilas emphasizes the idea of *continuity* rather than *frequency* in receiving the eucharist. In their eyes the sacramental life is not a series of separate emotional experiences but a whole life whose very reality demands constant sharing in the sacramental mystery that incorporates us in Christ.

*Our Lord assumed not only a body but also soul, mind, will, all that belongs to human nature, in order to unite himself to our whole being, and completely penetrate us and resolve us into himself by altogether joining what is his to that which is ours... He shares everything save sin in common with men... That is the power and grace of the Eucharist in souls that draw near to it with pure heart and keep themselves afterwards from all evil. There is nothing to prevent Christ from uniting himself intimately with those who are thus prepared and disposed. Great is this mystery, writes Saint Paul in praise of this union, for it is the glorious mystical marriage in which the divine Bridegroom unites himself to his Church, as to his Virgin Bride (IV:6-7).*

Deification therefore in the thought of Cabasilas fits into an ecclesiological context: the Church and the sacraments are the way to God, for the Church is in absolute reality the Body of Christ. Note that Nicholas uses this image of Saint Paul's in a hesychast sense and, more precisely, in the context of Macarian anthropology. Is not the "heart" rather than the



Constantinople under the Turks: St Sophia as a mosque.

"head" the noblest bodily organ in which the mind dwells? Cabasilas thus boldly completes the Pauline image of Christ the Head by that of Christ the Heart of the Church, emphasizing it as the sole source of all life in the Church.

*By the Bread of life we become members of Christ much more perfectly than by any other sacred rite. For as the bodily members live by the head and the heart, so "he who eats me*

*will live by me," the Saviour says... In conformity with the normal role of heart and head, we are moved by him, and live in relation to him... He communicates life to us, as heart or head do to the members of the body... (III:8) .*

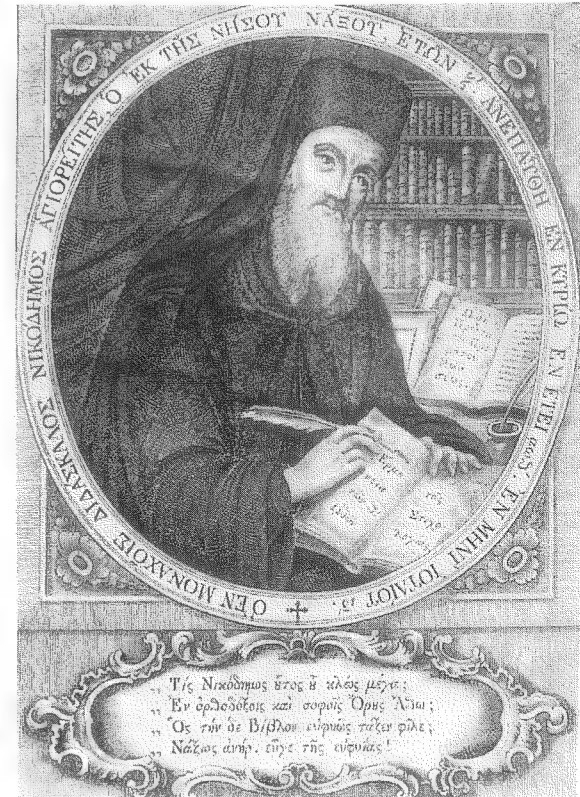
*Whoever has chosen to live in Christ must necessarily live in dependence on that heart and that head, for that is the way life comes to us... Our members must be kept pure for they are the members of Christ; since we are dependent on this heart that is Christ, we must have his own thoughts and his own desires.*

Thus as the hesychast draws his mind down into his heart to discover God there as the first fruits of baptismal grace, so too all Christians, members of the Body of the Church, must return to its Heart, to Christ.

After the fall of Constantinople, the hesychast tradition did not die out in the East. The very simplicity and directness of its precepts enabled it to inspire monks and laity who during four centuries of Moslem occupation, deprived of schools, of literature and of clerical organization, faithfully preserved the treasure of Orthodox spirituality.

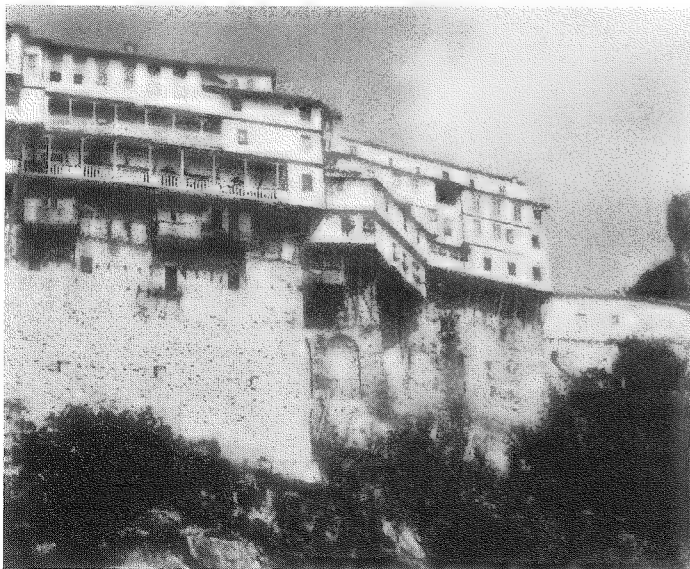
Mount Athos remained the chief center of religious life and its libraries provided the essential requirements of patristic documentation for the very few scholars of the time. There too Maximus Trivolis—known in sixteenth-century Russia as Maximus the Greek—and Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1748-1809) were initiated in pure prayer.

Nicodemus, a monk of the Athonite monastery of Dionysiou, was an erudite polygraph who holds a special place in the history of hesychasm. In collaboration with Macarius, Bishop of Corinth, he published in 1782 at Venice an anthology of patristic texts on pure prayers entitled *Philokalia of Neptic Saints*. Through this edition the modern world has come to know the tradition of the "Jesus prayer." Before recent decades produced many detailed studies of hesychasm, the *Philokalia* was the chief source from which Eastern monks and Western scholars alike



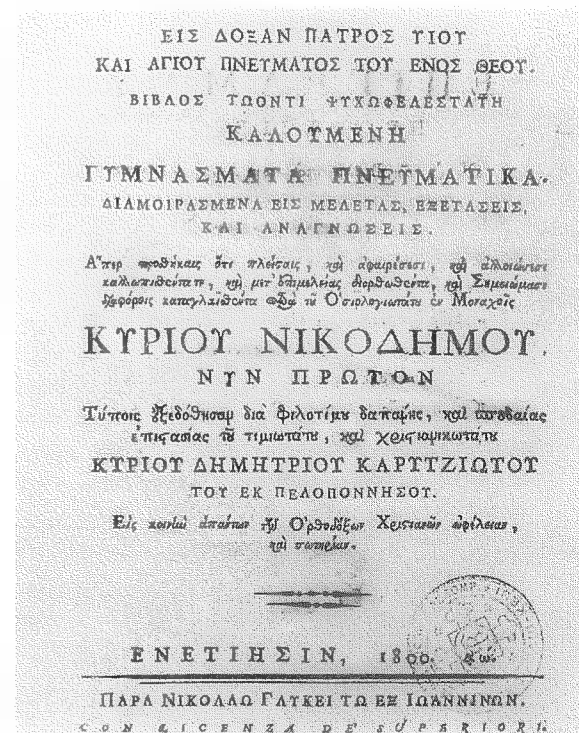
*St Nicodemus the Hagiorite.*

could learn about the mystical writings of Evagrius, Macarius or Nicephorus the Hesychast. Nicodemus' anthology leaves much to be desired in regard to the text, but as it was translated first into Slavonic and then into Russian (with many additions) it became a primary source of the great nineteenth-century hesychast revival in Russia and other Orthodox lands.



Monastery of Dionysiou, Mount Athos.

Nicodemus had an open mind and an indefatigable zeal in collecting material, seeking everywhere for texts to inspire renewal of unceasing prayer in the East. He discovered such prayer in two Western writings: *Spiritual Warfare* of Scupoli and the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola. Without naming the authors, he published adaptations of these works, translating the original titles into Greek (*Aoratos Polemos*, Venice, 1796; *Pneumatika Gymnasmata*, Venice, 1800). Scupoli's adaptation by Nicodemus has also appeared in English (*Unseen Warfare*, Faber, London, n.d.). Nicodemus certainly had the critical acumen to discern the differences between these Western writings of the sixteenth century and the spirituality of the Desert Fathers. But he published them in his desire to show the universality of the practice of prayer, which everywhere in all



*The Spiritual Exercises,*  
Edited by Nicodemus.

its divergent historic forms emerges as the essential characteristic of all true spirituality.

Quite independent of this interest in Western writers, and inspired by the Eastern Fathers alone, Nicodemus sought to promote frequent communion on Athos and in the Orthodox Church in general. In doing this he was following the purest tradition of hesychasm. He published a little treatise on this subject (*On Frequent Communion*, Venice, 1783) and provoked fierce attacks from some quarters, but in the end its doc-

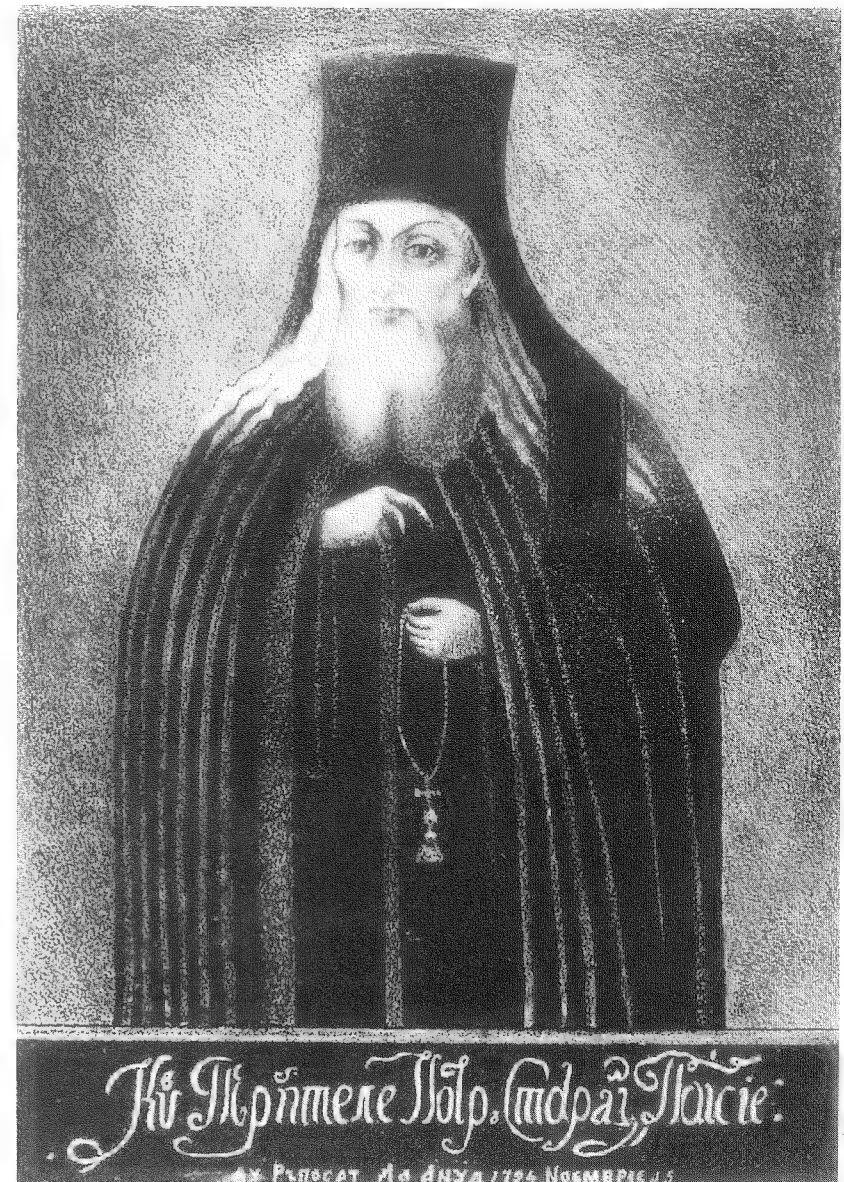


trine was accepted. An official decree of the Synod of Constantinople, dated August 1819, ended the discussion by sanctioning the principle that the faithful should communicate at every eucharistic liturgy and recommending communion every Sunday (Mansi-Petit, *Collectio conciliorum* 40, col. 82). The memory of Nicodemus was solemnly honored when on May 31, 1955, the patriarchate of Constantinople promulgated the decree of his canonization. His writings are again becoming popular today: a third edition of the *Philokalia* has just come out in Athens and the most active spiritual movements, such as the *Zoe* confraternity, appeal to his authority especially in promoting frequent communion.

The work of Nicodemus had profound effects on the development of the hesychast tradition not only in Greece but in the whole Orthodox world. His contemporary, Paisy Velichkovsky (1722-1794), made this work widely known in Slavic countries.

Paisy was born in the Ukraine, became a monk at Athos and founded there the Skete of the Prophet Elias, which is even today one of the three centers of Russian monasticism on the Holy Mountain. Later he went to Neamt in Moldavia, where he worked to restore hesychast traditions in Rumanian and Russian lands, keeping always in touch by correspondence with many Russian monks and seculars. It was due to personal relations with Paisy that the first *startzy* of Optino were introduced to the Jesus prayer... Nevertheless the chief work of the great *starets* of Neamt was his Slavo-Russian edition of the *Philokalia* of Nicodemus, entitled *Dobrotolubiye*, published at Saint Petersburg in 1793. In this work Paisy did not limit himself merely to following the texts as printed in the Greek *Philokalia*. He himself went back to the texts of the Fathers and translated into Russian works omitted by Nicodemus, especially several writings of Gregory Palamas not included in the Greek *Philokalia*. Several of Paisy's translations are still unpublished.

Paisy's work was circulated in Russia in many handwritten or printed copies. We see the unknown *Pilgrim* buy a copy of



Paisy Velichkovsky

the *Dobrotolubiye* for two rubles. The Fathers of Optino used it as a basis for new patristic translations and Theophanus the Recluse published a revised and enlarged edition which is still today the favorite spiritual nourishment of Russian monks. Finally our own day has seen a real "Philokalian renaissance" in Rumania, where an expanded edition of the *Philokalia* in the Rumanian language is now being brought out.

## THE HESYCHAST TRADITION IN RUSSIA

Long before the work of Palsy Velichkovsky, hesychasm was known in the monasteries of Russia. We have, it is true, no precise information on this subject before the fourteenth century, for our knowledge of Russian monasticism of the Kievan period (tenth to twelfth centuries) links it primarily to the cenobitic tradition of the Studios Monastery in Constantinople. The Mongol invasions have left us few documents of the early centuries of Christian Russia, and it is by no means sure that even then the tradition of Saint John Climacus had not already borne fruit in the great northern country.

But we have many testimonies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries on the spread of hesychasm throughout Russia. Many Byzantine writings were at that time being translated in Bulgaria and Serbia, new countries that aspired to be the spiritual heirs of Byzantium. Many of these translations came to Russia. The Fathers of the desert and more recent spiritual writers were given translations and commentaries at Mount Athos also, especially in the great Serbian monastery of Chilandari, where the Slavic monks had direct contact with the great hesychast masters, and at Paroria, the hermitage Gregory of Sinai had founded in Bulgaria. In spite of the political decline of the Byzantine Empire, the ecumenical patriarchs of the second half of the fourteenth century—Isidore, Callistus, and especially Philotheus, who were all disciples of Palamas—worked to spread his ideas and by their zeal for Orthodoxy won unparalleled prestige in Slavic lands.

It has at times been questioned whether "Russian mysticism" was really a direct development of Byzantine hesychasm. Some Russian writers have tried to prove the autonomy of this mysticism as springing spontaneously from the soul of the Russian people. This point of view, unexpectedly, is sometimes supported by Western theologians, in whose eyes Byzantine hesychasm is no more than an aberration of illiterate monks. Yet as they can-



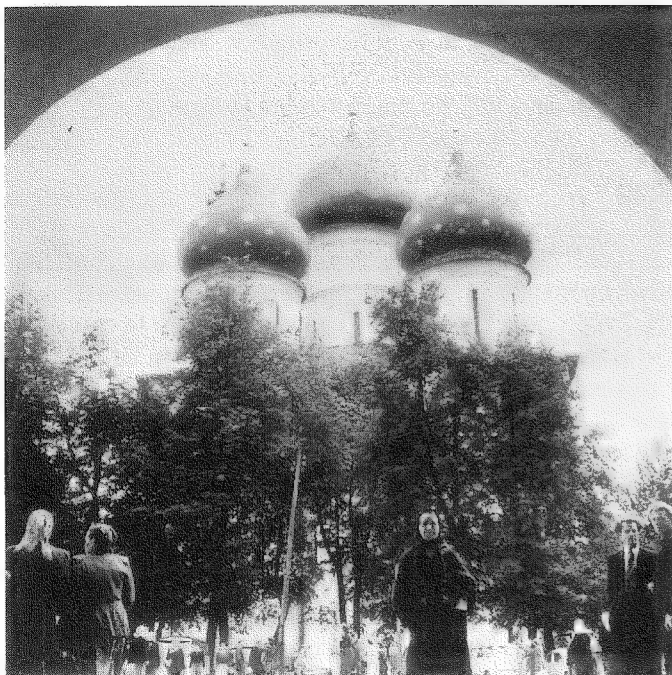
St Sergius.

not deny the reality of recent manifestations of authentic holiness in Russia, they tend, therefore, to consider it as purely Russian in origin. It is indeed undeniable that in the Russian environment, hesychasm acquired certain new characteristics. The Russian saints were less interested in speculative theology, and their deep and lyric sense of the cosmos tended to humanize hesychast mysticism; also they emphasized, more than the Greeks, the social implications of eremitic monasticism. Nevertheless, the essential content of the spiritual tradition remained rigorously the same. Russian adepts of "intellectual prayer" turned only to the Greek Fathers, now in large measure made accessible to them. We have just mentioned the innumerable translations put at their disposal from the fourteenth century on. This tradition was continued by Paisy Velichkovsky so that by the nineteenth century the Russians had a very complete patristic library in their own language. Russian is indeed the modern European tongue that is richest in translations of the Greek Fathers.

We have much information about the arrival in Russia at the end of the fourteenth century of hesychasts from Byzantium and their program for spiritual renewal. The best known among them is Cyprian, the Metropolitan of Kiev (1376-1406), who had come to know hesychasm from Gregory of Sinai's disciples in Bulgaria. Cyprian's plan emphasized social problems, because of the special situation in Russia: "It is not the tradition of the Fathers," he declared, "for monks to own land and serfs; how can they again be occupied with worldly matters after renouncing the world and worldly possessions?" (*Akty istoricheskie* I, Saint Petersburg, 1841, n° 253). Thus the hesychasts entered fifteenth-century Russia to preach monastic poverty, following in this the great mendicant orders of the West. As in all medieval Europe, the Russian Church and monasteries held enormous estates, constantly being increased by donations and protected by special privileges.

Cyprian's teaching soon won adherents, especially in the northern monasteries already acquainted with hesychast spirituality. For in the middle of the fourteenth century, St. Sergius, the great founder of Russian monasticism, and many of his disciples were already practicing the Jesus prayer. The rich library of the Lavra of the Trinity founded by Sergius (today Zagorsk) had translations of Gregory of Sinai dating from the fourteenth century. Moreover, many monks went on pilgrimages to Mount Athos and there learned hesychasm at its very source.

*The Lavra of the Trinity, Zagorsk.*



Among those pilgrims was Nilus Maikov (1433-1508), a young monk of the monastery of Saint Cyril of Belozersk in the forests of Northern Russia, beyond the upper Volga. On his return from Greece, Nilus founded a hermitage (Skete) on the Sora river, roughly ten miles from the monastery of St. Cyril; there, with a group of disciples, he spent the remainder of his life in the practice of hesychast spirituality. At the end of the fifteenth century, Russia—and all Europe—entered a new period of history: the Middle Ages was over; in the new era the religious ideal, in the East embodied in the Byzantine theocracy, lost its essential role in the life of society. In Russia circumstances decreed that this change should coincide with the unification of the country under a centralized government, ruled by the all powerful princes of Moscow, who claimed to be the legitimate successors of the Roman Emperors of the East. In reality, the Muscovite state—a fact that is too seldom emphasized—was not a medieval state at all: the political ideals of its leaders were inspired more by Machiavelli and the autocratic systems of contemporary Europe than by Byzantine theocracy, which always to some degree remained subject to Church dogma and law.

In the framework of this modern state, a wealthy Church was obviously an anachronism. The monastic lands—comprising one-third of the country—were indeed a handicap to a government that was in constant need of land to grant as compensation to soldiers and officials. The great princes therefore established a policy of partial secularization of Church property for the benefit of the State. This aroused the opposition of the most traditional element of clergy and monks, those who believed that the Byzantine ideal was eternal, that Moscow was the “Third Rome.” If the Muscovite princes really claimed to be the spiritual heirs of the *basileis* should they not, like their Byzantine predecessors, guarantee the rights of the Church? Did not the Church need estates and serfs if, as the





*St Nilus.*

heart of Russian theocracy, it was to maintain its monopoly of charitable works and, to some degree, of education also?

The defenders of ecclesiastical possessions were led by the learned abbot, Joseph of Volotsk. He had established severe discipline in his own monastery that followed the Studite rule,

in many ways like that of the Benedictines. His monks could never be accused of enjoying material goods for their own advantage, being wholly stripped of all private possessions. But the community itself was enormously rich in order to carry out Joseph's ideal of the social function proper to monks: charitable works, preaching, social action.

We cannot discuss here in detail the conflict Joseph and his followers had with the State. It is enough to say that at first the great princes yielded to the Josephite party and, in return, it gave their policy loyal support. Joseph was very sincere in his belief that only Muscovite centralization could create a new Byzantium in Moscow. Nevertheless, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the Russian Church progressively despoiled of its holdings, which were finally confiscated almost entirely by Catherine II, in exchange for state stipends allotted to the clergy. Joseph and his followers relied too confidently on the rulers of Moscow, utterly failing to grasp the direction history was taking—a fact which was to deal a death blow to Joseph's social ideal, admirable though it was.

It is all the more interesting to look now at the hesychast party. From the beginning it had evaluated the situation more clearly; it met the changes of modern times with a supra-temporal ideal, independent of historic contingencies. The extant texts of Saint Nilus of Sora are a striking example of absolute fidelity to the Byzantine hesychast tradition combined with a remarkable spiritual simplicity, so characteristic of later Russian saints also.

The first text we will quote is taken from an *Instruction to His Disciples* by the great *starets*, Nilus:

*By the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and with the assistance of our Lady, I have written a teaching for the profit both of my soul and the souls of my lords, who are truly related to me in the brotherhood of one spirit. I therefore call you brothers instead of disciples. We have but one teacher, our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 23:8), Who gave us the Scriptures and*

*sent the holy apostles and the venerable fathers to teach the way of salvation to the human race. These saints began by doing good, only afterwards did they teach. As for me, I have done no good whatsoever, but I expound the teaching of the Holy Scriptures for those who desire salvation (Treasury of Russian Spirituality, ed. G. P. Fedotov, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1948, p. 90).*

*First, let us speak of faith. I believe in one God glorified in the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, consubstantial and indivisible. I believe also in the Incarnation of the Son of God and I confess him to be perfect God and perfect man... I have recourse with my whole soul to the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; I accept and I revere with faith and love all the doctrines it has received from the Lord and from the holy apostles...*

*It is my conviction that since it is by God's will that we are gathered together, then we should be faithful to the traditions of the saints and the commandments of God, and carry out the instructions of the holy fathers (Instruction, ed. by M. Borovkova-Maikova, Pamjatniki drevnej pis'mennosti, Moscow, 1912).*

Beside this unfailing fidelity to orthodoxy, St. Nilus sees poverty as the essential condition for monastic life:

*We have been instructed by the holy fathers to gain our daily bread and other necessities by manual labour, as Our Lord and His Immaculate Mother have commanded. "If any man will not work, neither let him eat," says the Apostle... If, because of physical disability, or for some other good reason, we cannot earn a sufficient livelihood by our own efforts, we may accept a few donations from laymen, but these alms must never be excessive. It is not to be thought of that we should take the fruit of other men's labor by force, for then how should we, who are a prey to our passions, be able to keep God's commandment that "if a man will contend with thee in judgment and take away thy coat, let go thy cloak also unto him" (Matt 5:40)?*

*In buying or selling necessary commodities, we should not bargain to the disadvantage of our brother, but should prefer to suffer a loss ourselves. If we employ laymen, we should never withhold what we owe them, but should give them their pay with our blessing and let them go in peace (Fedotov, pp. 91-92).*

Ought not the monks keep any reserve stores for charitable purposes? St. Nilus' answer is a clear negative.

A monk is only a monk; he is dispensed from almsgiving. He can honestly say: "I have given up all things to follow Thee" (Matt 19:27)... The monk's alms are a helpful word spoken to his brother and the spiritual advice with which he gives comfort in the time of sorrow or any other necessity (Fedotov, p. 92, adapted).

The monasticism taught by Nilus has the prophetic character of its sources, as a witness to evangelical poverty applied to every aspect of life. The hermit of the Sora rejects riches even when used to decorate churches:

With regard to the decoration of churches, St John Chrysostom writes: "If a man wished to donate sacred vessels or other furnishings to a church, tell him to give them to the poor." "For," he adds, "no one has ever been condemned for not decorating a church." (Fedotov, p. 93).

The Rule that Nilus composed in his hermitage was inspired by the Greek Fathers, especially John Climacus, whom he quotes at length, and also other great hesychast masters—Isaac of Nineveh, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory of Sinai. He avoids any over-exact formulation, leaving the monks very great liberty in the detail of exterior practices such as fasting, contenting himself with stating the need for it. He lists the classical array of passions and vices to be fought and then concentrates the attention of his monks on the Prayer of Jesus.

*We should endeavor to maintain our mind in silence, remote even from such thoughts as may seem legitimate. Let us*

constantly look into the depths of our heart, saying: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me." Some of the time we should repeat only part of this prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Then again, resuming, say: "Son of God, have mercy upon me"; since, according to Gregory of Sinai, this is easier for beginners. However, due order should be observed in this, and such alternations not made too frequently... Recite the prayer attentively in this manner, standing, sitting, or reclining. Enclose your mind in your heart and, moderating your respiration so as to draw breath as seldom as possible (as Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory of Sinai teach us), call upon God with fervent desire, in patient expectation, turning away all thoughts (Fedotov, p. 100).

If you glimpse the impurity of malignant spirits in the representations of your mind, do not fear, do not wonder, and even though they seem good to you, pay no attention to them, but forcibly restraining your breathing and gathering your mind into your heart, call Jesus Christ to your aid, arming yourself with Him, appealing to Him frequently and laboriously, and the imaginations will dissolve, burnt invisibly by the Divine Name (Fedotov, p. 101).

We find here again the same precepts and method of prayer that had been taught by the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century hesychasts. Nilus refers constantly to their writings and their practices, especially in regard to the number of monks allowed in one hermitage.

*We find that all the holy writings praise the life of silence with one or two brothers. I myself have witnessed it on holy Mount Athos, and in the country about Constantinople* (Fedotov, p. 132).

In the early sixteenth century, when the great princes of Moscow proposed the secularization of monastic property that roused opposition from most of the clergy, they found unex-



*St John Chrysostom. Mosaic, 9th c., St Sophia, Constantinople.*

pected support in Nilus and his disciples. The great *starets* appeared in person at the Council of 1505 to declare that "monks ought not to possess villages"—that is, employ serf labor—but "live by the work of their own hands." A pleiad of disciples, the Transvolgian *startzy* upheld him. They defended monastic poverty as essential to the eschatological mystery of Christianity; monks must give this traditional testimony especially at a time when the Russian Church, with all its possessions and privileges, was tempted to settle comfortably into the theocratic framework of the "Third Rome." For the Transvolgians felt very strongly that to enrich the Church was actually to subject it to the civil power; what they wanted was greater inde-

pendence for the Church. One of their faithful supporters was an Athonite, Maximus the Greek, who had been a Dominican in Florence and a disciple of Savonarola before becoming a monk in the Eastern Church.

*I do not see, Maximus wrote, the magnificent Ambrose, bishop of God, fearlessly defying the mighty Empire of Theodosius the Great; I do not see Basil the Great, glorious for his holiness and wisdom, whose sermons terrified the tyrant Valens; I do not see the great John Chrysostom, openly denouncing the Empress Eudoxia for her greed (Maximus the Greek, Writings, II, Kazan, 1869, 336-337).*

As a whole, the Russian Church did not follow the counsels of Nilus and his followers. The Transvolgian party was decimated by punitive decrees promulgated against them by a series of Josephite councils. Yet its heritage was not lost. In the nineteenth century, in fact, the spiritual life of Russia turned back to the hesychast tradition, revived by the labor of Nicodemus the Hagiorite and Paisy Velichkovsky, finding it a living link between the new era and Orthodox tradition.

From the first years of the century in centers scattered throughout the whole immense Russia of Alexander I, hesychast monasticism began to reappear, inspired by disciples of Paisy or indirectly influenced by him. At the heart of this renewal two phenomena of exceptional importance stand out: the line of *startzy* at Optino and the solitary personality of the greatest saint of the contemporary Orthodox Church: Seraphim of Sarov.

Optino was an old hermitage of the sixteenth century near the little town of Kozelsk in central Russia. At the end of the eighteenth century it had been almost entirely abandoned, when Plato, the Metropolitan of Moscow, making a visitation of his diocese, felt the attraction of this site, once the chosen retreat for solitaries. Deciding to reestablish monastic life there, he asked a disciple of Paisy, the archimandrite Macarius, to send ■ small group of brethren. In 1821 the monks

erected a new hermitage very near Optino, dedicated to the Beheading of John the Baptist. Soon, the *startzy* of Optino acquired unique fame throughout all Russia.

The institution of *starets* was in no sense a phenomenon peculiar to Russia. From the very beginning of eremitical monasticism, novices gathered around the *gerontes* or "elders" (in Russian: *starets*), seeking their direction and counsel. The fourteenth-century hesychasts also considered obedience to a *geron* the necessary condition for ■ balanced spiritual life. We have seen how Palamas developed in his *Hagiorite Tome* a prophetic concept of monastic sanctity as ■ structural element in his theology of history. Holiness and its manifestations are essentially an anticipation of the Kingdom to come, that is already present in every Christian by the grace of baptism, although attaining full realization only in the saints. This concept of sanctity explains the phenomenon of the Optino *startzy*, which was in fact ■ rebirth of the prophetic ministry in

*Optino*





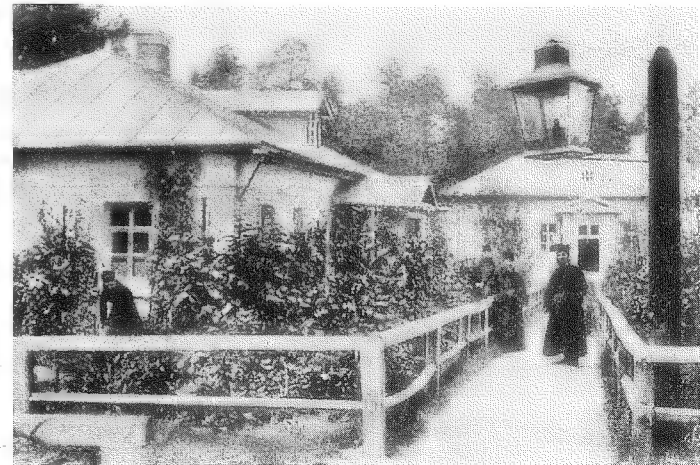
the Church. The Fathers of Optino seem typically Russian, but in them the ancient hesychast prophetic character appears with great power and authenticity in the midst of the nineteenth century. It drew not only novices in search of their vocation but crowds of seculars, seeking spiritual direction, and in that crowd, came a Gogol, a Dostoevsky, a Khomiakov, a Soloviev, a Leo Tolstoi.

*The senator, the poor peasant, the student—in the eyes of the elder, all seemed equally suffering and in need of spiritual medicine... Some came to ask whether they should marry their daughter or their son. accept a job, move to another village to find work... A peasant woman asked advice on how to feed her turkeys... and received it. To his amazed followers the starets answered: her whole life is in those turkeys (S. Tchetverikoff, The Optino Hermitage, in Russian, Paris, 1926, pp. 76-77).*

No problem that was significant in the life of a human being was indifferent to the *starets*.

In the *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky describes the setting and atmosphere of Optino in detail; something of the character of Zosima reappears in the famous *starets* Ambrose, who from 1873 to 1891 succeeded Father Leonidas and Father Macarius, the founders of the institution of the *startzy* at Optino. Strongly tinged with romanticism, in the references to the Earth Mother for example, the real Ambrose is only vaguely portrayed in Zosima and their identity was formally disavowed at Optino. Dostoevsky himself never claimed that his description of the hermitage was fully accurate. But in any case, it is undeniable that these Fathers in an obscure convent of central Russia attracted the devotion of the great writer, as well as the intellectual elite of their country. That fact alone shows how important was the spiritual renewal centered there.

Each of the series of “elders” at Optino stands out as a unique personality. Leonidas was a man of the people, who enjoyed being original; Macarius, an intellectual, collaborated



*Optino monastery in the 19th c.*

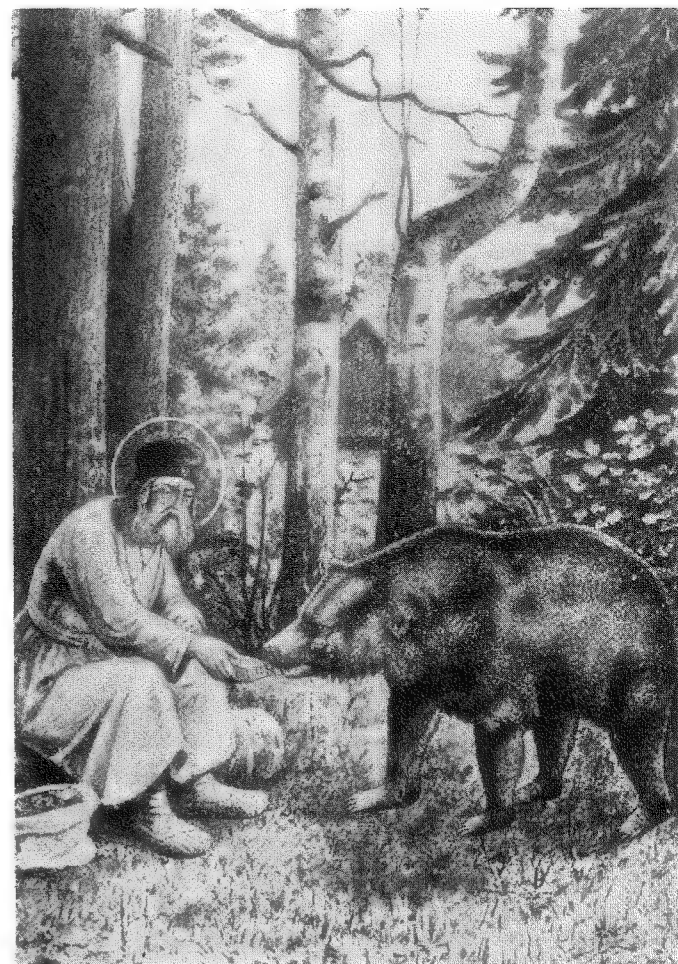
with professors of the University of Moscow in editing the works of Paisy Velichkovsky and, by the end of his life, became the center of a theological circle; Ambrose had been a seminarian. The only link between them was their absolute fidelity to the tradition of the Prayer of Jesus.

Most of their available time was dedicated to the service of men. Their function went far beyond that of the ordinary spiritual director, for they consciously possessed a special charism: they saw with immediate vision the concrete destiny of each human being who came to them, and God's will for him. This concrete prophetic aspect of their ministry may appear suspect to a Western Christian who is used to religion conceived in a rigidly institutionalized setting. Yet the *starets*' prophetic gift was never in opposition to the Church. Did not Nilus Sorsky begin his Rule with a profession of faith and obedience? The “elders” of Optino, in fact, only revealed the fullness of the

new life that all Christians receive—a more intimate knowledge of God and, through God, of man.

Saint Seraphim (1759-1833) is certainly the most striking example of this revelation of sanctity. The son of a businessman in Kursk, he entered the novitiate of the Sarov monastery at the age of nineteen; at twenty-seven he received the monastic tonsure and at thirty-four was ordained priest. For ten years, 1794-1804, he lived alone in the forest, following to its least detail the Rule of Saint Pachomius of Egypt, which he had found in his wide reading of patristic literature. The wild animals of the immense Russian forests—bears, wolves, foxes—were his only companions; witnesses tell us that he fed them with his own hand. On September 12, 1804, Seraphim was badly beaten up by robbers and found unconscious in his hermitage. He had offered no resistance to his attackers and refused to testify against them at their trial. The shock damaged his health severely, and it took him several months to recover. Once well again, he followed the life of the ancient stylites, from 1804 to 1807: for a thousand days, night and day he prayed, kneeling on a stone, leaving it only to take food and brief rest. He returned to the monastery from 1807 to 1825, save for a few brief intervals; here he never left his unheated cell, with no bed. One lamp burned before the only icon, the Virgin of Tenderness. His daily schedule, focused on the Jesus prayer, involved weekly reading of the four gospels (Monday, Matthew; Tuesday, Mark; Wednesday, Luke; Thursday, John; Friday, the office of the Holy Cross; Saturday, the office of All Saints). On Sunday he communicated in the Holy Mysteries brought to him in his cell by the priest who celebrated the Liturgy.

On November 25, 1824, he had a vision of the Mother of God, accompanied by Saint Peter of Alexandria and Saint Clement of Rome. After this he accepted the office of “elder” and began to receive pilgrims in his cell. He would greet them as “my joy,” teaching them that the whole of Christian life consists



*St Seraphim and the bear.*



*The death of St Seraphim.*

in "the acquisition of the Holy Spirit." In this simple monk, theological understanding was sharpened by personal spiritual experience: Jesus, Son of God, invoked in ceaseless prayer, reveals Himself by the presence of the Spirit and the two divine Hypostases together lead the soul to intimacy with the Father.

There are countless stories about Saint Seraphim and his teaching, but we will quote here only a passage of the famous *Conversation with Motovilov*, where we find again the whole mysticism of light as known and practiced by Symeon the New Theologian and the fourteenth-century hesychasts.

*"Nevertheless I do not understand how I can be firmly assured that I am in the Spirit of God. How can I myself recognize His true manifestation."*

*Father Seraphim replied: "I have already told you, my son, that it is very simple... We are both together, son, in the Spirit of God! Why lookest thou not on me?"*

*I replied: "I cannot look, father, because lightning flames from your eyes. Your face is brighter than the sun and my eyes ache in pain!"*

*Father Seraphim said: "Fear not, my son; you too have become as bright as I. You too are now in the fullness of God's Spirit; otherwise you would not be able to look on me as I am."*

*Then, bending his head towards me, he whispered softly in my ear: "Give thanks to the Lord God for His ineffable mercy! You have seen that I did not even cross myself; and only in my heart I prayed mentally to the Lord God and said within myself: Lord, vouchsafe to him to see clearly with bodily eyes that descent of Thy Spirit which Thou vouchsafest to Thy servants, when Thou art pleased to appear in the light of Thy marvelous glory. And see, my son, the Lord has fulfilled in a trice the humble prayer of poor Seraphim. Surely we must give thanks to Him for this ineffable gift to us both! Not always, my son, even to the great hermits, does the Lord God show His mercy. See, the grace of God has come to com-*

*fort your contrite heart, as a loving mother, at the intercession of the Mother of God herself. Come, son, why do you not look me in the eyes? Just look and fear not! The Lord is with us!"*

*After these words I looked in his face and there came over me an even greater reverential awe. Imagine in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling brilliance of its midday rays, the face of the man who talks with you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone grasp your shoulders; yet you do not see the hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading several yards around and throwing a sparkling radiance across the snow blanket on the glade and into the snowflakes which besprinkled the great elder and me... (Fedotov, pp. 273-275).*

*The earnest of that joy is given to us now, and, if from this there is sweetness, well-being and merriment in our souls, what shall we say of that joy which has been prepared in heaven for them that weep here on earth? You too, my son, have had tears enough in your life; see now with what joy the Lord consoles you while yet here! (Fedotov, p. 276).*

*For the present we must work, and make continual efforts to gain more and more strength to attain "the perfect measure of the stature of Christ". .. Then this transitory and partial joy which we now feel will be revealed in all its fullness, overwhelming our being with ineffable delights which no one will be able to take from us (tr. V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, London, James Clarke, p. 229).*

This hesychast tradition manifested itself in Russia throughout the nineteenth century at various cultural levels and in very different forms. A learned bishop, Theophanus the Recluse, published a greatly expanded edition of the *Philokalia* in modern Russian. His spiritual instructions, characterized by tact and moderation, have become classics of Russian religious literature. But also around

1860 appeared the famous *Way of a Pilgrim*, revealing the extent to which the "prayer of the heart" had penetrated the masses of the Russian people. Here is the beginning of this account:

*By the grace of God I am a Christian, by my deeds a great sinner, and by calling a homeless rover of the lowest states in life. My possessions comprise but some rusk in a knapsack on my back, and the Holy Bible on my bosom. That is all.*

*On the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, I went to church to hear Mass. The first Epistle of St Paul to the Thessalonians was read. In it we are exhorted, among other things, to pray incessantly, and these words engraved themselves upon my mind. I began to ponder whether it is possible to pray without ceasing, since every man must occupy himself with other things needed for his support. I found this text in my Bible and read it with my own eyes what I had heard, namely that we must pray incessantly in all places, pray always in spirit, lifting up our hands in devotion (1 Thess 5:16; Eph 5:18; 1 Tim 2:8). I pondered and pondered and did not know what to think of it (Fedotov, p. 283).*

A starets gives him the answer:

*... "The constant inner prayer of Jesus is an unbroken, perpetual calling upon the Divine Name of Jesus with the lips, the mind and the heart, while picturing His lasting presence in one's imagination and imploring His grace wherever one is, in whatever one does, even while one sleeps. This prayer consists of the following words: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!' Those who use this prayer constantly are so greatly comforted that they are moved to say it at all times, for they can no longer live without it. And the prayer will keep on ringing in their hearts of its own accord... You will learn how to master it by reading this book, which is called the *Philocalia*; it comprises the complete and minute knowledge of incessant inner prayer, as stated by twenty-five Holy Fathers. It is full of great*



wisdom and is so useful that it is regarded as the first and best guide by all those who seek the contemplative, spiritual life. The reverend Nicephorus said once: 'It leads one to salvation without labor and sweat'."

"Is it then loftier and holier than the Bible?" I asked.

"No, it is not, but it sheds light upon the secrets locked up in the Bible which cannot be easily understood by our shallow intelligence..."

The starets opened the *Philokalia*, chose a passage of Symeon the New Theologian, and began to read:

"Take a seat in solitude and silence. Bend your head, close your eyes, and breathing softly, in your imagination, look into your own heart. Let your mind, or rather, your thoughts, flow from your head down to your heart and say, while breathing: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Whisper these words gently, or say them in your mind..." (Fedotov, pp. 287-288).

We see the *Pilgrim* recommend the Prayer of Jesus to all Christians, not to monks alone. That is in fact what the anonymous author says explicitly, quoting the authority of Gregory Palamas:

Gregory of Thessalonika speaks on this as follows: "Not only should we ourselves in accordance with God's will pray unceasingly in the Name of Jesus Christ, but we are bound to reveal it and teach it to others, to everyone in general, religious and secular, learned and simple, men, women, and children, and to inspire them all with zeal for prayer without ceasing" (*The Way of a Pilgrim*, tr. from the Russian by R. M. French, Harper and Row, New York, 2nd ed., 1952, pp. 55-56).

The diffusion of the Jesus prayer throughout all levels of Russian society is illustrated further in the work and personality of Father John of Kronstadt (1829-1908). This simple parish priest of Kronstadt (the military port of Saint Petersburg, on an island in the Gulf of Finland) had astonishing renown in



Fr John of Kronstadt.

Russia for hundreds of miracles—chiefly of healing and prophecy—attributed to his intercession by countless witnesses. The appearance of this holy thaumaturge on the eve of revolution and disaster seems to many even today a sign of God's unfailing care for the Christians of Russia.

John of Kronstadt was in many ways linked with the hesychast tradition. In the first place, he himself practiced the Prayer of Jesus and recommended it to others:

*To resist the constant attacks of the evil spirit, keep the prayer of Jesus always in your heart: "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me." Against the invisible one (the devil)—the invisible God; against the strong one—the Strongest (quoted by A. Semenoff-Tian-Chansky, *Father John of Cronstadt*, in Russian, New York, 1955, p. 201).*

But also when Father John entitled his most important book *My Life in Christ*, he was certainly referring intentionally to the fourteenth-century work of Nicholas Cabasilas, well known by translations in Russia, with its magnificent testimony to sacramental mysticism. For John of Kronstadt saw his own thaumaturgic powers, even his priesthood, as an expression of sacramental grace in its struggle with evil in all its manifestations:

*When I was ordained priest and pastor, experience quickly showed me who my enemy was to be in the future...the strong one, the evil Prince of this world. The Lord, the good Shepherd sent me trials; I fought against my enemies with the weapons of faith, prayer, penance and communion in the Holy Mysteries of Christ. In this warfare I learned what was sincere faith, hope, patience, prayer, purity of heart—the unceasing invocation of the Name of Jesus Christ (ibid.).*

The tradition of the desert Fathers and of monastic hesychasm lives again, whole and entire, in this dramatic concept of Christian life, in this Christocentrism, in this constant reference to the prayer of the Name of Jesus, and lastly, in the ex-

treme eucharistic realism that Gregory Palamas and Nicholas Cabasilas had defended in their own day.

*I die, wrote Father John, when I do not celebrate the Liturgy... I am overwhelmed at the majesty of the Sacrifice...at the immeasurable Love that is revealed in it, at the Death that deifies us, at the Power of God, at the Miracle! O Lord Jesus Christ! You are here, whole and entire! We see you, we touch you, we feel you here! (ibid., pp. 66-67).*

We cannot doubt that this recent mystical tradition, so rich with fruit, has survived the terrible trial which Russian Christianity has undergone during these last decades. Our knowledge of religion in Russia is unfortunately too fragmentary and too superficial to betray the "pilgrims" who still keep the Name of Jesus burning in their heart, as they plod the vast plains of Russia, or to reveal a new Father John in some provincial priest. Perhaps one day we will learn who were those hidden guardians of a message that proclaims the real and accessible presence, at the very heart of history, of humanity deified in Jesus Christ.



The coming of Christ. Miniature, 15th c.

## CONCLUSION

The tradition of "pure prayer" in the Christian East has shown an amazing continuity from the fourth to the twentieth century. Different masters have shaped it in different forms but the essential principle of unceasing prayer focused on the Name of the Incarnate God has never been questioned, once the intellectualism of Evagrius had been definitively absorbed by Christocentric and sacramental mysticism. This piety, intimate and personal, never isolated man from the ecclesiastical

community but supernaturally bound him to it permanently. For the Christ whom this prayer seeks in a man's own heart, the Divine Name that it invokes can be found within his heart only in the measure in which he is grafted into the Body of the Church by baptism and the eucharist. The Prayer of Jesus, as the Fathers understood it, never replaces the redemptive grace of the sacrament but rather is its fullest realization. The hesychast tradition thus provides a balanced solution to the problem that often faces the director of souls: how to harmonize individual devotion with liturgical piety.

If the hesychast doctors achieved this equilibrium, it is certainly due to their Biblical concept of man. No doctrine has done more harm to Christian piety than the Platonic dualism that conceives man as a spirit (or "soul") imprisoned in matter, naturally immortal, aspiring to a supra-material existence of which the historic community of the Church is only a pale reflection. Neither the Incarnation, then, nor the Resurrection from the dead, nor the real community that Jesus founded on earth, nor the material reality of eucharistic communion have anything truly valuable to offer us. God's revelation is in reality addressed only to spirit, intellect, imagination, sentiment, that is, to the few faculties that will not vanish with death, but survive as the attributes of the immaterial being. In such an anthropological setting, all piety becomes ineluctably subjectivist.

On the contrary, the search for an objective vision is the essence of hesychasm: an objective vision of God granted to man in his whole being. Gregory Palamas played a key role in the dogmatic definition of this crucial point and for this he deserves the place given him in the tradition of the Orthodox Church. Only the whole man can receive grace, not any one part of the human composite—imagination, soul, or body—taken separately. Hence the constant warnings of hesychast masters against corporeal visions (corporeal only!) or imaginary ones (imaginary only!). Both are equally demonic temptations that destroy the unity of man, the unity that Christ came to reestablish by giving him immortality. Neither the bodily eyes in themselves nor the intellect or imagination, disembodied and therefore incomplete and sterile, can by themselves receive the grace of Christ from the baptismal font.

The hesychasts interpreted the patristic doctrine of deification in terms of this integral humanism. Deification is not a supernaturalizing of the intellect alone; it presupposes no kind of de-materialization. From Macarius of Egypt to Seraphim of Sarov, the mystics of the Christian East have held that com-

munion with God embraces the whole human composite, that divine light sometimes shines forth in the very body of the deified man, that this light is an anticipation of the resurrection of the last day. Is all that grossly materialistic, wholly alien to all spiritual categories? Just the opposite. The hesychast "materialism" is intrinsically the Biblical affirmation of the transcendence of God: God is not only above matter, He is above all intellect. The created intellect is no closer to Him than is matter: both are equally nothing before the face of His majesty and His omnipotence, and inversely, God can reveal Himself—if He desires to do so—to the eyes of the body as easily as to the intellect. Why limit the power of grace by the categories of Platonic spiritualism?

This absolute transcendence of God and His omnipotence are expressed in the theology of Palamas with remarkable power and clarity. It would be idle here to try to distinguish his theology from his spirituality. Theological existentialism and hesychast mysticism are two necessary, complementary aspects of one and the same truth.

Therefore the victory of Palamas was the victory of Christian humanism over the pagan humanism of the Renaissance. The full measure of the controversy's significance can be grasped only in the light of what followed. An ineluctable decision was set before the Orthodox Church in the fourteenth century: a choice between a unitary (integral) concept of man based on the Bible, affirming the immediate efficacy of redemptive grace in every sphere of human activity, or the choice of an intellectualized spiritualism claiming independence for the human intellect, or at least autonomy from all matter, and denying that any real deification is possible here below. There is no doubt that the secularism of the modern age is the direct consequence of the second choice.

The survival of the hesychast tradition and its recent development in the heart of the Orthodox Church would certainly



have been impossible without the doctrinal and anthropological synthesis to which it corresponds. Its power lies not in any one spiritual practice nor any one method of prayer, but in the unyielding affirmation of certain truths revealed about man, about God, and about the presence of Jesus Christ in the heart of the believer. When the Orthodox Church canonized Palamas, it affirmed its fidelity to these truths and explicitly rejected the doctrinal and moral principles that have formed the basis of modern civilization since the Renaissance. For centuries the Church has seemed rigidly crystallized in its own past, indifferent to the achievements of that optimistic humanism full of faith in the infinite potentialities of Man alone and in the limitless progress of civilization. Yet now we have come to a time when such optimism more and more shrinks back before terrifying perspectives revealed in this unlimited progress of "autonomous" science. Man now begins to see that the self-deification for which he has sought in vain is all an illusion. Yet he is now too well aware of the staggering power within matter itself to be content any longer with the more or less rationalized spirituality sometimes offered him as the essence of Christianity. He seeks for a God who is present and acting in history, in man as he is, in the reality of daily life.

Hesychast spirituality cannot answer every problem of our day, only the Gospel itself can do that; yet it is strikingly pertinent for us precisely because it is so faithful to the Biblical concept of God and man, and because of the total freedom of its piety centered on the unique reality alone—on Jesus, the Son of God Incarnate. The survival of the hesychast tradition in the heart of the Eastern Church is not the despotic rule of a particular school of spirituality, but rather a total fidelity to the one thing necessary in all Christian life. It is in this sense that we can speak of the prayer of Jesus as a manifestation of *orthodox spirituality*.



# Chronology

East	West
48-49 Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)	
48-58 Missions of Paul	
64-67	Martyrdom of Peter and Paul at Rome
ca. 100 Death of John	
324 Foundation of Constantinople, New Rome	
325	First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea
381	Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople
ca. 400 Death of Macarius the Great and Evagrius of Pontus	
431	Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus
ca. 435	Death of John Cassian
ca. 450 Diadochus, bishop of Photice	
451	Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon
Separation of the "Monophysites" (Copts, Ethiopians, Armenians, Syrians)	
476	End of the Roman Empire in the West
547	Death of St Benedict
553	Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople
554	Italy and Africa reconquered by Justinian
ca. 587	<i>Filioque</i> added to the Creed in Spain
590-604	St Gregory the Great, Pope
650 Death of St John Climacus	
662 Death of St Maximus the Confessor	

680-681	Sixth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople	
692	Synod in <i>Trullo</i> (Quinisext)	
726	Beginnings of iconoclasm	
787	Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea	
792		Charlemagne accuses the Greeks of heresy ( <i>Libri Carolini</i> )
800		Charlemagne crowned Emperor at Rome
843	Definitive triumph of Orthodoxy over iconoclasm	
860		Pope Nicholas I refuses to recognize the accession of Photius to the patriarchate
863	Baptism of the Bulgars	
867	Nicholas I deposed by Photius	
879-880	Reconciliation between Photius and Pope John VIII; Council of Constantinople	
988	Baptism of the Russians	
1014		<i>Filioque</i> added to the Creed in Rome
1022	Death of Symeon the New Theologian	
1054	Excommunication of Michael Cerularius by the legates of Pope Leo IX	
1073-1085		Gregory VII, Pope
1198-1216		Innocent III, Pope
1204	Sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders	
1226		Death of Francis of Assisi
1240	Mongols at Kiev	
1261	Constantinople retaken by Michael VIII Paleologos	
1274		Unionist Council of Lyons; death of Thomas Aquinas; death of Bonaventure

ca. 1280	Death of Nicephorus the Hesychast	
1308		Death of Duns Scotus
ca. 1316	Gregory Palamas at Athos	
1326	Death of Theoleptus of Philadelphia	
1327		Death of Meister Eckhart
1341	First Palamite Council	
1347	Second Palamite Council	Death of William of Ockham
1351	Third Palamite Council	
1359	Death of Gregory Palamas	
1368	Canonization of Palamas	
1371	Death of Nicholas Cabasilas	
1378-1429		Great Western Schism
1392	Death of St Sergius	
1414-1418		Council of Constance
1431-1449	End of Mongol domination in Russia	Council of Basel
1438-1439		Unionist Council of Florence
1446	The See of Moscow raised to an "autocephalous" metropolis <sup>1</sup>	
1453	The Turks capture Constantinople	
1505	Nilus of Sora defends monastic poverty at a council in Moscow	
1517		Luther protests against indulgences
1545-1563		Council of Trent
1546		Death of Luther
1551	Council of Moscow ( <i>Stoglav</i> )	
1556		Death of Ignatius of Lyola
1564		Death of Calvin
1582		Death of Theresa of Avila

<sup>1</sup> In Orthodox canon law, "autocephaly" means the right possessed by a group of dioceses to elect and consecrate their own primate.

- 1589 The See of Moscow raised to a patriarchate
- 1596 Part of the Orthodox in Poland unite with Rome (the "Uniate" Church)
- 1629 Calvinist confession of faith of Cyril Lucaris
- 1641
- 1642 Council of Jassy condemns Protestant errors
- 1648
- 1652-1658 Patriarch Nikon reforms the Russian Church; schism of the "Old Believers"
- 1672 Council of Jerusalem
- 1713
- 1721 Peter the Great suppresses the Patriarchate of Moscow and replaces it by a Holy Synod
- 1782 Nicodemus the Hagiorite publishes the *Philocalia*
- 1789
- 1794 Death of Paisy Velickovsky
- 1821 Renovation of Optino hermitage
- 1833 Death of St Seraphim of Sarov
- 1850 Autocephaly of the Church of Greece
- 1854
- 1870 Independance of Bulgarian Church (recognized in 1946)
- 1879 Reestablishment of autocephaly for the Serbian Church
- 1881 Roumanian autocephaly
- 1908 Death of John of Cronstadt
- 1917-1918 Reestablishment of the Moscow Patriarchate; Russian Revolution

Condemnation of Jan-  
sen's *Augustinus*

End of Thirty Years' War

Bull *Unigenitus*

French Revolution

Dogma of the Immaculate  
Conception; Vatican I

## Notes on the Illustrations

- p. vi This portrait icon of St. Gregory Palamas today is found in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Moscow. It was described and reproduced for the first time by V. Lazarev in *The Burlington Magazine* LXXI (1937). Its style makes it possible to date the icon with certitude to the third quarter of the fifteenth century. Since Palamas was canonized only in 1368, it could not be anterior to that date. Thus we have a portrait of the hesychast doctor painted within a dozen years of his death, at a time when his features could not yet have become blurred in the memory of his friends and disciples. Represented in the traditional pose of sainted bishops, holding in his left hand a Gospel book and blessing with his right hand, Saint Gregory wears a tonsure, in the manner of all the Byzantine monks of this period. The practice of wearing long hair, in fact, was not established for Eastern clergy until the period of the Turkish occupation.
- p. 6 The *Ladder* of Saint John Climacus was, in the course of the Middle Ages, one of the most popular of spiritual works. Numerous manuscripts of it are preserved, of which many are illustrated with pictures depicting the monastic life in its most diverse aspects. We reproduce in this book many of these miniatures. The present one depicts a monk tempted by the devil: a pious reader could not refrain from effacing the image of the Evil One.
- p. 29, 61 Founded in the sixth century by Justinian, the monastery of Saint Catherine on Sinai clings to the side of the mountain on which God spoke to Moses. In former times it was one of the centers of the Eastern Church. Today the monastery has only some forty monks.<sup>2</sup> Its abbot bears the title of archbishop. Elected by the chapter, he is at the head of the smallest of the autocephalous (i.e. independent) churches of the Orthodox Christian world. His episcopal consecration is performed by the patriarch of Jerusalem. The library of the monastery is one of the world's richest in ancient manuscripts.
- p. 49 In representing the Resurrection (Anastasis), the Byzantines did not have recourse to the image of Christ coming forth from the tomb but rather to that of His descent into Hell. The Vanquisher of death there tramples under foot the prince of darkness, who holds captive not only sinners but also the righteous of the Old Testament. Taking Adam and Eve by the hand, Christ leads them to life, and with them, all humanity.
- p. 53 Mount Athos is a monastic republic covering the entire territory of a peninsula on the Aegean coast of northern Greece. The territory is divided among twenty monasteries. On the lands of these great establishments are numerous *sketes* and *kellia* which, in some cases, are in fact large convents. Karyes is the capital of Athos. There a few commercial buildings are grouped around the Protaton, the seat of the Athonite government. This government was once monarchic,

<sup>2</sup> As of the original date of publication (1959).



under the authority of a single *protos* (i.e. *first, premier*), who possessed powers extending through all the peninsula. Today these powers are held by a council of four delegates from the twenty monasteries, named in rotation.

- p. 96 The miniature of Paris Greek Manuscript 1242 was executed, at the order of John Cantacuzenus himself and during his lifetime, on a page of a book containing his own theological works. We see the emperor presiding over the Council of 1351, surrounded by bishops, monks, and civil functionaries. The features of the last bishop on the left resemble those of Gregory Palamas (cf. p. vi).
- p. 98 The original documents of the Byzantine imperial archives and of the archives of the patriarchate practically all disappeared with the fall of Constantinople. However a few fragments of the Synodal Tome of 1351 arrived in the West, probably in connection with the negotiations which took place between the Byzantines and the Council of Basel (on this subject see F. Döger, "Ein byzantinisches Staatsdokument," in *Byzantinische Diplomatie*, Eital, 1956, pp. 245-261). On this page we see the signature of John VI Cantacuzenus, in red ink in conformance with a privilege reserved for the emperors: "John, in Christ God faithful emperor and autocrat of the Romans, Cantacuzenus," and the signature of the patriarch Callistus: "Callistus, by the grace of God archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome, and ecumenical patriarch."
- p. 100 Every year on November 14 (date of the death and of the liturgical commemoration of St. Gregory) and on the second Sunday of Lent, the shrine containing the relics of the hesychast doctor is carried in procession through the streets of his episcopal city.
- p. 135 Our photograph shows the apse of Santa Sophia today. Transformed into a mosque after the fall of Constantinople (1453), the basilica of Justinian was partially furnished with Islamic ornaments and inscriptions drawn from the Koran, the Christian mosaics having been covered with plaster. What remains of these mosaics recently has been uncovered and restored by the American mission of Thomas Whittemore. Thus, in what is now the "Ayasofia" museum, one sees side by side the sumptuous vestiges of Byzantine art and the more recent signs of the Muslim conquest.

### Iconographic Sources

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John VI Cantacuzenus, Theological works, 14th c. (Paris, BN Greek 1242), pp. 102, 134.  
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